

hack//

Another Birth

vol.4//QUARANTINE_

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Character Files	005
The Entrustment of Hope	009
Mia's True Character	041
Each Resolution	073
Beginning of a Long Night	103
Disposition	139
Twilight	171
Another Epilogue	203
Postscript	219
Afterword	225
Art File	231

Character Files

.hack // Another Birth



Kite

A Twin Blade with the ability to rewrite data, he is trying to help his friend Orca, who also fell into a coma. He teams up with BlackRose.



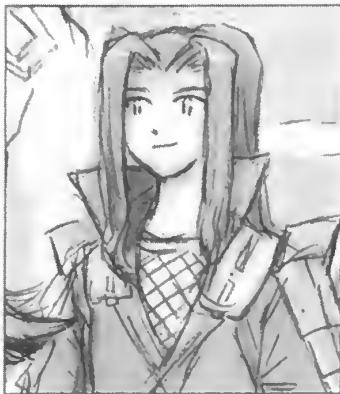
BlackRose

A Heavy Blade role-played by Akira Hayami, she enters The World only to determine why her little brother, Fumikazu, fell into a coma.



Chimney

A friendly Blademaster and Nova's partner, his goal is to spring all traps.



Nova

A Heavy Blade partnered with Chimney, he teaches BlackRose the basics of The World.



Mia

A catlike avatar who shouldn't exist, she takes an interest in Kite's bracelet and gives Akira information. She often is seen with Elk, a Wavemaster.



Balmura

Known as one of the "Descendents of Fianna," he completed The One Sin event along with Orca. He's also trying to find information about Orca's coma and believes Kite might be the cause.



Natsume

A Twin Blade who runs into Kite, she doesn't understand how dangerous this adventure is.



Mistral

A highly inquisitive Wavemaster who likes to collect unusual items, she is actually quite level-headed, although she often seems impulsive.

The Entrustment of Hope●

Not able to work up the motivation to don the Face-Mount Display goggles—otherwise known as FMD—I sat in front of my computer gazing at my BlackRose character, who stood motionless in town. During my months of experience in The World, I never had let my imagination get carried away speculating on things to come—but perhaps that was only because I never had any concrete information to go on. Now, however, since I had discovered that Mia was having dreams where her name was Macha, my imagination was running wild.

What the heck is that supposed to mean?

I suppose you could say that Operation Breakwater—the first mission the uneasy alliance of Kite, Lios, Helba, Balmung, Wiseman, and I had undertaken—was a success. Before then our motions had been purely reactionary, responding after damage was already done. With Helba and Wiseman's cooperation, this time we had been able to analyze data from The World and home in on the “sign” of the Wave—one of the eight Phases—before any damage

.hack // Another Birth

occurred. We'd also been able to keep any negative backlash from happening after we defeated it.

That operation surely had worked precisely because we had all agreed to work together. However, I just couldn't feel very happy about it—the cloud of gloom I had felt hadn't dissipated at all.

There were still three Phases left—Macha, Tarvos, and Corbenik. So far, the Phases all had arrived in order, so that meant Macha was next.

What if Macha and Mia are one and the same? I had seen plenty of evidence that Mia was different from everyone else—there were things she could do that were impossible for any normal player character. *If Mia is really one of the eight Phases . . .*

“Argh!” With that thought in mind, I could no longer just sit there staring, so I decided to put on the FMD and search areas where Mia had been known to hang out. I never exchanged member addresses with her, so I couldn't just contact her directly via Flash Mail. “But . . .” I muttered to myself as I arrived at Fort Ouph's Chaos Gate; then I cocked my head. *Where is Mia all the time?*

I knew that she went Aromatic Grass-Collecting with Elk, but I'd never heard of her going out to collect it on her own. I'd also never seen her just wandering around town, and I had a hard time picturing her adventuring in a field by herself.

Just searching randomly for her would be pointless, though. The number of fields available by choosing keywords was near infinite, and checking them all was an impossible task. Although towns were more likely, that seemed like a dead end, as well. I wanted

the_entrustment_of_hope

to talk to Mia before we fought Macha, but I had no idea where to look for her. Realizing I was worrying over a situation I could do nothing about, I logged out of the game to try the one other thing I could think of—e-mailing Kite and Elk to ask them about Mia.

I want to talk with Mia. Do you know where she is?

I hit *send*; but I didn't give a detailed reason, so I figured they probably would just ask me "why" instead of telling me where she was—if they had any idea. Elk was one thing, but Kite never had mentioned forming a party with Mia. It was natural for him to respond with curiosity.

I breathed out deeply, removed my goggles, and checked the time on the cell phone that sat charging next to my computer. *Mistral is pregnant—I doubt she'll be up this late at night*, I thought, and started composing an e-mail. But very soon after I sent it, my phone rang.

"I'm sorry, did I wake you up?" I said, answering it.

"Nope, I was awake," came Mistral's reply. "It's been a long time since I've chatted on the phone this late, though!"

"If it's a problem . . ."

"No worries! I'm usually awake at this time. So, what's up?"

Mistral's usual chipper voice flooded me with relief, and I wondered where I should start. *Should I tell her about Mia or start from the beginning and talk about our fight with Gorre?*

.hack // Another Birth

As I sat there perplexed, she spoke up. "You said in your e-mail that there was a lot to talk about. It's not like we're logged in and time is of the essence, right? So just take your time and tell me everything."

"Yeah . . ."

"Did something happen today?"

I sighed. "This might take a while."

"That's fine. I don't mind. So, what happened?"

"You see . . ." I said, and I told her all about the dream Mia had, about the rule Harald had included in *The World*, and about what was troubling my mind—how we next might have to fight Mia in the form of Macha, and how I wanted to talk to her before that. As I talked, Mistral kept almost completely silent—as she had when she'd listened to me back in *Carmina Gadelica*—chiming in only from time to time to indicate she was paying attention.

When I had told her everything that was on my mind, she murmured, "You can't say for sure it's a coincidence."

"Mia's dream?" I asked.

"Right. It doesn't seem strange to me if an irregular PC like that turned out to be an enemy."

"But it looks like she's gotten along well with Kite and Elk up 'til now," I protested.

"That's it!" Mistral cried.

"Huh?"

"Why has she gotten all weird?"

"Why?" I hadn't really thought about it, so I stumbled for an answer. "Um, maybe she knows she's next, so she's confused." *Does*

the_entrustment_of_hope

Mia know that she's Macha, one of the eight Phases? "But if she did know, I don't think she would've talked about the dream."

"That's true," Mistral considered. "But . . ."

"But?"

"I think maybe she's just beginning to understand."

"Her true identity?"

"Probably," Mistral said. "That could be why she doesn't show up around people very often."

"I get it now," I said.

Mistral laughed. "Well, it's a hypothesis!"

"What if . . ." I paused.

"Hmm?"

"If I managed to talk to Mia," I said, "I wonder if I might get some clue about how to save the coma victims."

"Hard to say," Mistral replied. "If she really is a Phase, then I'll bet she doesn't know about that."

"You mean there's something else manipulating events behind the scenes?"

"Probably. I mean, aren't the eight Phases called signs of the Wave? They're signs. *Signs*."

Mistral stressed that point, and I wasn't sure how to respond.

"But I wouldn't be afraid of her," Mistral said cheerfully. "You've got Kite's bracelet!"

I nodded slowly. "That's true." Like she said, there was no reason to feel anxious. As long as we had Kite's bracelet, I expected things would turn out all right.

.hack // Another Birth

“Ooh!” Mistral said suddenly. “The baby just kicked! It’s sure been moving around a lot lately!”

That brought me back to reality. “Really?”

“Yup. The next time we see each other, I’ll have to let you feel it. It’s really something else!”

“I guess there’s no denying you’re a mother now, Mistral,” I said.

“That’s the first time in a long while anyone’s called me Mistral,” she—Mrs. Kurokawa—said, laughing. It was a very nostalgic sound.

“In your real life, no one calls you that,” I said dolefully.

She paused. “Actually, I wish I could help out. Do you have enough Wavemasters?”

“Oh, we’re all right.”

We finished up with some more small talk, and then I hung up and plugged the cell phone back into its charger. Collapsing into bed, I stared up toward the ceiling as I pondered. Catching sight of my wall calendar out of the corner of my eye, I took a long, hard look at it.

It had been three short months since I had registered for The World. I had hoped the situation would be worked out quickly, but it was too complicated for me to resolve on my own. However, with the help of my companions, we had managed to make real progress.

Will it be just a little longer? Even after we defeated the last three Phases, there might be, as Mistral said, something else working

the_entrustment_of_hope

behind the scenes. Was it Cubia? Or was it perhaps some other enemy we had yet to encounter? '



The next day, due to final exam preparations and to the fierce competition for winter tennis season starter spots, I came home exhausted. Dinner was a lot of pre-prepared food from the supermarket, and our family conversation was more or less as it had been of late. So as not to drag things down even more, I was nothing but forced smiles as I talked about the day I'd had at school. But even my father, who used to be so supportive, made only a few grunts to show he was listening. *To think that Fumikazu's absence would pull this family so far apart . . .*

I couldn't take much more of the oppressive air, so I gathered up the dishes, as had become my routine, deposited my little brother Kouta in the bath, and escaped back up to my room.

I started up my computer and opened the e-mail I had forgotten to check the night before. There was a version upgrade notice from CC Corp., as well as a message from Lios. It seemed that the Omega server, one rank higher than Sigma server, had been opened up. He wanted to hold a discussion there. The message had been sent recently, so it seemed an easy task to get there without being late.

"Everyone's been called together, hmm?" I said aloud, and then I started writing an e-mail to Kite.

.hack // Another Birth

Seems we're meeting at Ω server. Maybe it's about another operation? I'm going on ahead.

I watched the message finish sending; then I logged in. Choosing Other Servers from the Fort Ouph Chaos Gate, I saw that Ω server had been added to the list.

"Time to go," I murmured to myself, and my BlackRose character began the transfer. In the pitch-blackness between worlds, there was a familiar noise, and I cocked my head. *Something about this seems suspicious.* . . . However, it wasn't possible to interrupt a transfer once initiated, so all I could do was watch the display closely.

The moment I appeared before the Chaos Gate in the Ω server root town, Lia Fail, a fierce noise split the air and the view on my display started shaking like there was an earthquake. With the FMD on, this made me feel like I was going to be sick, so I practically flung it off.

Switching to the main monitor, I looked around to see if anyone else was there. Spying Balmung and Wiseman, I tried to ask them what was going on, but that's when Kite warped in next to BlackRose. "Kite!" I cried as I tried to approach him—but the controller wasn't responding.

Then I saw Helba warp in. "This place is too dangerous," she called. "We're bouncing."

"Helba?" Kite shouted. "Bouncing—?" But if he said anything after that, his voice was covered up by the noise. We all warped out following Helba's lead.



the_entrustment_of_hope

“Welcome to Paradise!” Helba said, and the intense noise and shaking ceased. I once again donned the FMD; what I saw looking around me seemed to be the Net Slum I’d visited so many times.

“Net Slum?” Kite murmured, more calmly than his previous shouts.

“It’s a mirror of Ω server,” Helba said, smiling. “My own, that is.”

A mirror server? So, Helba’s a good enough hacker to make something like this. If she could make a statement like that so calmly, who the heck was she?

Lios was there, too, and he looked around indignantly. “When did you . . . something like . . .” he spluttered. “I can’t let my guard down at *all* with you!”

“Ah, but thanks to this mirror server, we can be safe,” Helba chided him.

Safe? I thought. *So it was that serious of a situation?* “Yeah!” I cried. “How were we supposed to do anything somewhere *that* unstable?” Doing battle in a place where just being there made the graphics warp was out of the question.

“I apologize,” Lios said in a monotone devoid of any hint of introspection.

“Is that supposed to mean you’re sorry?” I shouted.

“I *said* I apologize!”

What is with this guy? I seethed, glaring at Lios. *This is an administrator?!* Not that his behavior was anything new, but no simple apology made up for summoning us to such a dangerous place.



.hack // Another Birth

"Come now," Wiseman said soothingly. "Nothing will come of dwelling on things that are in the past." He looked around, confirming that all the members of our alliance were present. "Shall we commence the strategy meeting?" Seeing that I had stopped protesting, he continued. "Presently, the Wave is still on the move. While its exact location is difficult to determine, doing what we can to limit its destination points is the gist of this operation." He looked at Kite. "Right?"

Taking his cue, Kite spoke up. "Yes. Something I heard from Orca is that when orcas—in other words, killer whales—hunt their prey, their companions form an enclosure to block off the escape routes. But if they surround them on all sides, the prey will panic and scatter, escaping through the gaps. So, instead, they intentionally leave one wider path open, herding the prey to a convenient spot."

"A convenient spot?" I said. *In an online game spanning the globe, where could a convenient place be?*

"The surface," Kite said. "From the prey's standpoint, that's a dead end. If our opponent is moving now, I thought maybe we could apply the same principle."

"It's a good plan," Helba said.

I was hardly able to understand why that would be so, but Wiseman moved on. "Based on an analysis of the virus cores supplied by Lios, Helba has developed a vaccine program," he said. "Though we call it a vaccine, it's impossible for it to effectively exterminate the Wave. However, if all it needs to do is herd it

the_entrustment_of_hope

somewhere . . . then, all right. Leave it to me.” He considered. “But do we have enough people?”

Is there a specific place we want to use the vaccine to herd the Wave? I wondered.

“No need to worry about that,” Lios said. “We’ll leave it to my reliable subordinates.”

Helba smiled at Lios’ proposal. “Which means more pigheads.”

“Shut up!” Lios shouted.

Balmung ignored him. “Pigheads aside—”

“Whaaat?!” Now Lios kept looking at Balmung, but Balmung paid no heed and continued on.

“Your pardon,” he said. “What do we need to prepare?”

“Hmm,” Lios said, considering. “I want a data fluctuation measurement carried out. You three should investigate Ω : Bigoted, Snowflake’s, Capsule. Get started right away.”

Data fluctuation—doesn’t that mean The Wave, the eight Phases? But I nodded to Lios, and Kite nodded, too. “Roger!”

“Then, disperse!” Wiseman commanded, and Lios, Helba, and he warped out and disappeared. That left Kite, Balmung, and me, and we walked around town a bit before heading out.

What we saw was drastically different from the real Lia Fail. The shaking during our brief visit earlier had afforded us only a glimpse of numerous trees and a large stone staircase that stretched out from the Chaos Gate. It had given me the impression that it was quite a large town. Comparatively, the Lia Fail mirror server

.hack // Another Birth

that Helba had set up could easily be mistaken for Net Slum if you didn't look closely. Naturally, the usual Net Slum residents weren't there, but the buildings were ruins just like in the real place. Still, the shops there functioned normally, and the items they dealt in there were identical to the ones sold in other towns in The World.



A scorched snowfield spread before our eyes when we warped to Ω: Bigoted, Snowflake's, Capsule. The three of us ran through it and aimed for the dungeon. Although the graphics were contaminated, that was the only sign of damage. I'd been braced for terrible noises and shaking like we'd encountered in the town; but, thankfully, it had turned out to be more stable than that.

The field's battle level was sixty-eight, however, which neither Kite nor I—nor even Balmung—was at a high enough level to deal with easily. Perhaps from a desire to avoid needless combat, Kite avoided tripping as many magical portals as possible as we descended into the dungeon. But it was impossible to avoid combat entirely, so our trek toward the lowest level was interrupted by some very difficult fights.

On floor B4, the lowest level, Kite soon halted us in front of a doorway where a purple mist hung. "Maybe something's in there?" he said.

"Maybe one of the eight Phases?"

the_entrustment_of_hope

At my reply, Balmung burst out laughing. “Impossible! If that were the case, Helba would have contacted us. Even Lios doesn’t seem the type to have sent us to investigate without proper preparation, had he known a Phase would be here.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” I said. Then I thought, *If it’s not a Phase, maybe it’s one of Harald’s rooms?*

“Anyway, let’s go in,” Kite said, and we advanced into the mist.

As what awaited us in the room’s center came into view, I shouted, “Data Bug!”

The monster was like a big sea lion clad in all-too-familiar luminescent green hexes. It didn’t seem to have any physical tolerance, so the three of us focused on attack skills as we whittled away at its hit points—but perhaps because our character levels weren’t very high, not much was coming off.

Due to my extremely low defensive power, just one hit from the monster did me quite a bit of damage. *Have Data Bugs always been this strong?* I wondered. Our recent fights with Data Bugs had gone so smoothly, it was a shock to have such a rough time with this one. My recovery items drained away in a very short amount of time, and Kite drew back to take my place focusing on recovery.

“Are we in trouble here?” I muttered to Balmung as we fought.

He sighed. “We’re totally outmatched.”

“So, what do we do?” I said, dodging another blow.

“There’s only one thing we *can* do right now,” Balmung said. “Fight with all our might.”

.hack // Another Birth

Too busy to respond, I used an item to recover skill points, and then I started into an attack skill.

"There it is!" I heard Kite shout from behind.

I looked up to see that the text "Protect Break OK" had appeared around the Data Bug.

"All right!" I shouted as an arrow of light flew from over my shoulder and pierced the Data Bug. The shining green hexes burst open, and a monster called a Sand Hill appeared. We'd fought those before, so an easy victory was imminent.

Kite returned to the battle's front and used all his SP to smash the monster with a single blow. Unlike the Data Bug, the Sand Hill went down quickly, and as it faded away, we heard Lios' voice say, "Data measurement complete. You've fulfilled your duty. Good work."

Then his voice was gone, and I sighed deeply as I wondered just how high and mighty Lios thought he was.

Kite noted my sigh and said, "Let's go back to town." After we warped to Lia Fail, we disbanded our party—but then I was immediately invited back into a party by Kite.

What gives? I wondered. But he seemed serious, so I hurriedly accepted the invitation. "What's up?"

"Another e-mail arrived from Aura," Kite said.

"Aura . . . Why, do you think?"

"The other day when I data drained Gorre, I got another segment," Kite said. "I think she probably wants it."

"Did she say where we should meet her?"

the_entrustment_of_hope

Kite sighed. "I can't tell. The text is scrambled, and I can't decipher it."

"Jeez . . ." I laughed. "Someone should chew out her parents for not teaching her better spelling!"

Kite grinned. "You mean Harald and Emma?"

I laughed again. "Anyway, let's take it easy the rest of the day," I said. "We don't know when we'll be needed next."

"You're right. Good night."

"Good night."

I left the party and, after some restocking in Lia Fail's shops, logged out for the night.



At the breakfast table, I munched away at my bread as Mom started talking to Dad. "I heard there was an Internet-related accident in a hospital somewhere," she said. "Don't they say nearly all medical appliances are connected to the network these days? I'm thinking about stopping by Fumikazu's hospital to inquire about it."

I froze in mid-chew. Dad, not looking up from his newspaper, said, "His hospital's a university hospital, right? It's probably perfectly safe."

Mom shook her head. "If the machines are all connected to the same network, a university hospital is probably no more secure than a private hospital."

.hack // Another Birth

Dad muttered, "You don't need to get so nervous about it," but Mom didn't seem to hear him.

"I'm worried," she fretted. "Today's Sunday, so Akira will be home. I'll have her look after Kouta while I'm away."

"Okay," Dad said, standing up and folding his newspaper. "Travel safely."

Mom turned to me. "I can count on you to watch Kouta, can't I?"

"Sure, that's fine." I'd been thinking about spending the morning studying for finals, but there was no refusing that tone of voice.

Dad said he had to stop off at his school, so after I saw my parents off, Kouta and I went back to the living room. He started telling me all about his kindergarten while he happily dragged out some toys; as I had feared, studying became almost impossible.



Even though Sunday was a day off for most people, I didn't get to see Kite the entire day. Once Mom finally got home in the evening, I quickly went back to my room and entered The World. I had a feeling that if I returned and waited at the spot where we had logged out the previous day, I'd come in contact with him eventually. Leaving my computer's monitor active instead of using the FMD, I paused BlackRose by the Chaos Gate and opened my books to study.

the_entrustment_of_hope

I had a reason for waiting. Since Kite was just a middle school student, he wasn't likely to be in the habit of watching the news. But the accident Mom had mentioned earlier had been reported online, as well, so Kite might have heard about it.

Mom had reported that Fumikazu's hospital was safe—this time. There was no guarantee that the networked medical equipment wouldn't be compromised at some point in the future. The thought was unbearable.

It was obvious that the strange happenings in the real world were linked to the game.

As my desire for quick action and my knowledge of the pointlessness of being overeager roiled in conflict within me, Kite materialized.

"BlackRose?" he said, noticing me.

"Hey," I said.

"What's wrong?" Kite questioned.

"Did you see the news?" I said. "About Niizato University Hospital? It has to be connected in some way, you know. I couldn't help but think, 'What if that had happened at the hospital Kazu's in?' Now, I just can't sit still."

"Yeah," Kite said flatly.

"That's all? 'Yeah?'" I wasn't really looking for sympathy, but I had expected more than that from Kite, and my voice inadvertently rose.

"I feel the same way as you," Kite said. "I want to remove the Wave from this world as soon as possible. But, you know . . ." He

.hack // Another Birth

paused. "Everyone's finally on the same team. I'm sure things'll work out. So we shouldn't panic."

I knew that all too well. But . . . "I know that, but . . . Kazu, and even Orca—"

"Orca's all right," Kite said, uncharacteristically hanging his head.

"Hey, you mean . . . the hospital Orca's at—" I started to say, and then I swallowed my words. Kite never mentioned it, but maybe the hospital Orca was in was Niizato . . . ? "Is that it?"

"Yeah," Kite said. "But he was all right."

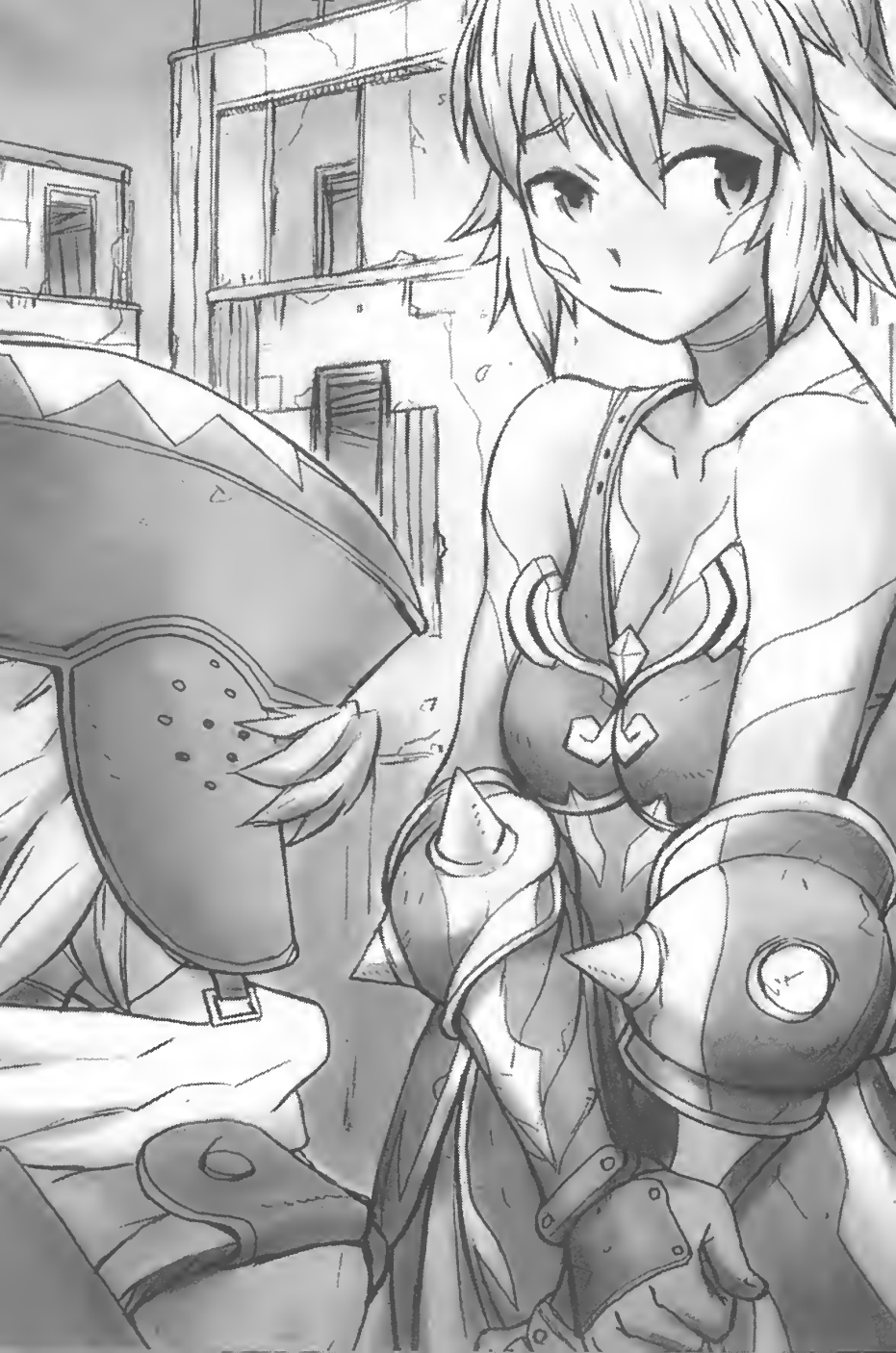
I couldn't believe I'd been so insensitive. "Sorry, I didn't . . ." Kite was under pressure, too, yet . . . what would happen if I, the older one, allowed myself to panic?

I have to stay calm. Not knowing what else to say, I cast my eyes about aimlessly and saw—

"Huh?" At some point during our conversation, a familiar Net Slum resident had come to stand next to me. "Hey, Kite, the guy next to me . . ." I lined up the cursor and his name popped up: Spiritas. I was pretty sure I recognized him as the fast-talking, enigmatic NPC we had met before.

Kite slowly approached Spiritas and said, "Umm . . ."

Spiritas spun quickly around to face him and, as usual, started speaking so quickly that we had to pay close attention so we didn't miss anything. "In my own way, I have thought things over—and I reached the conclusion that I should cooperate with all of you," he said. "There seems to be a mysterious room at Σ : Screaming, Wind



.hack // Another Birth

Sand's, Fate Castle. If you get involved, you might be able to reform this world. . . .”

Then he suddenly warped out. Kite and I kept looking in mute amazement at the spot he had vacated.

I turned to Kite and smiled. “Looks like there’s a lot expected of you . . . ‘Reform the world,’ he says.”

Kite rolled his eyes. “I don’t have that kind of power.”

I considered that. “But don’t you? When you use that bracelet?”

“This?” Kite said, looking at his right arm. We weren’t in a party at the moment, so I couldn’t see the bracelet, but I knew it was there.

“Anyway,” I said, “a mysterious room. Could that mean Harald’s room?”

Kite nodded. “Could be.”

“Then let’s head there now!”

“Yeah.”

After we transferred to Fort Ouph, we headed for the area Spiritas had told us about. The battle level was seventy—two levels higher than where we’d gone the day before—and it was a protected field.

“What do we do?” Kite asked while he brought up the gate hacking menu.

Like there’s any need to ask.

I didn’t respond, so Kite threw another question my way. “You okay on items?”

the_entrustment_of_hope

"I stocked up." *Kite's being his usual self, always wanting information, no matter what.*

"Then let's go."

Preparing ourselves for a tough battle in an area five levels beyond our experience, we warped into a scorched meadow. As we had on the previous day, we aimed for the dungeon while avoiding as many magical portals as we could. Still, the dungeon was so far distant that by the time we found the entrance, we'd each gained enough experience from unavoidable fights to go up a level.

"Looks like we're leveling up," Kite said, smiling.

"True, but that's not our goal!" I said. "Let's just get on down to the bottom of the dungeon."

"Sure."

We took a short rest to recover skill points; then we passed through the entrance. The moment we entered the dungeon, a strange sentence scrolled through the log, and we heard a voice seemingly out of nowhere. "Evolution . . . does not always mean progress."

"Huh?" I cocked my head.

"It's Harald . . ." Kite murmured.

"Harald . . ." I whispered. "One of his notes?"

"Probably." Kite urged me forward. We advanced through the dungeon, warily dealing with whatever popped out of the magical portals in our way.

When we descended to floor B2, the voice spoke again, seeming to continue the same train of thought. "Evolution sometimes leads

•hack // Another Birth

to an undesired vector.” There wasn’t much to that floor; we were able to battle through it quickly and were greeted with another sentence on the next floor down. “It is arrogant for one to reject change because it is undesirable.”

“So, what do you suppose Harald’s trying to say?” I mused.

“I can only wonder,” Kite replied.

“What makes *me* wonder is how he can say the word ‘arrogant’ so assertively,” I joked. Kite smiled.

Change, progress, evolution . . . I seemed to recall there having been an earlier note along the same lines. This stuff Harald was saying—who was he trying to teach these things?

“Rejection of change is the rejection of possibilities,” came the next sentence.

“Maybe he means Aura?” I murmured.

Kite disagreed. “No, I have a feeling it’s something else.”

When had Harald inserted notes like this into the game? Was helping out his daughter the right course of action for us, the ones who had only stumbled across Harald’s rule? Anxiety building in our hearts, we pressed on.

The voice came yet another time. “Allow diversity.”

“What’s that mean?” I said.

“Who knows?” Kite stood still, perhaps checking his log.

Does he mean we should approve of change? I didn’t list the ramblings of a genius among the things I understood easily. With few clues toward what Harald’s voice was trying to convey, we started walking toward the rear of the lowest level—floor

B5. Entering the next room, we suddenly found ourselves transported into one of Harald's rooms. There was no warning, no doorway filled with purple mist; we arrived with no chance to prepare.

Before us stood a hilltop ginkgo whose falling yellow leaves drifted down through the evening air. Beneath the tree was a woman with a long black skirt fringed with lace, whose eyes were shadowed beneath a parasol. She just stood there silently, her mouth in a perpetual smile—apparently she didn't see us.

Something about this tableau was hauntingly familiar. . . .
"Emma!" I cried. "It's Emma Wielant!"

Kite looked at me, surprised, and then he stared at the hill with its ginkgo. "The woman you were investigating, BlackRose?"

"Right!" I said; then I remembered something. "But . . . wasn't Harald supposed to be the one who was waiting?"

Emma Wielant reportedly had died in an accident, leaving Harald waiting for her beneath a ginkgo tree. The scene before us was similar, but it was opposite what had happened in reality. I reviewed what Hagiya had told me: "It was hours before news of Emma's death reached Harald, who continued waiting for her under the boughs of a large ginkgo tree on the top of a hill."

Why would Harald have left a scene like this in the game? I couldn't help but feel it was strange.

I took a resolute step toward Emma—the first movement Kite or I had made since being transported to the room—and a strange voice started speaking.

.hack // Another Birth

"Over the Keel Mountains,
Meets an ape with human speech.
The ape asks,
'What clings to you?
Bear it—you cannot.
Accept it—you cannot.
But hidden—it is from you.
Recite its name.'"

As I looked back through the log to review, Kite said, "It's a fragment." That was certainly what the literary style seemed to indicate.

"Hey, this part about something clinging . . ." I said.

"Hmm?"

I honestly didn't know how entangled the *Epitaph* was with The World, but the phrase suggested just one thing to my mind. "Could that be Cubia? The thing that clings to you—or to Aura."

"Bear it—you cannot. Accept it—you cannot," Kite murmured.

"I don't really get the 'hidden—it is from you' part, though," I admitted.

"Yeah, really," Kite said.

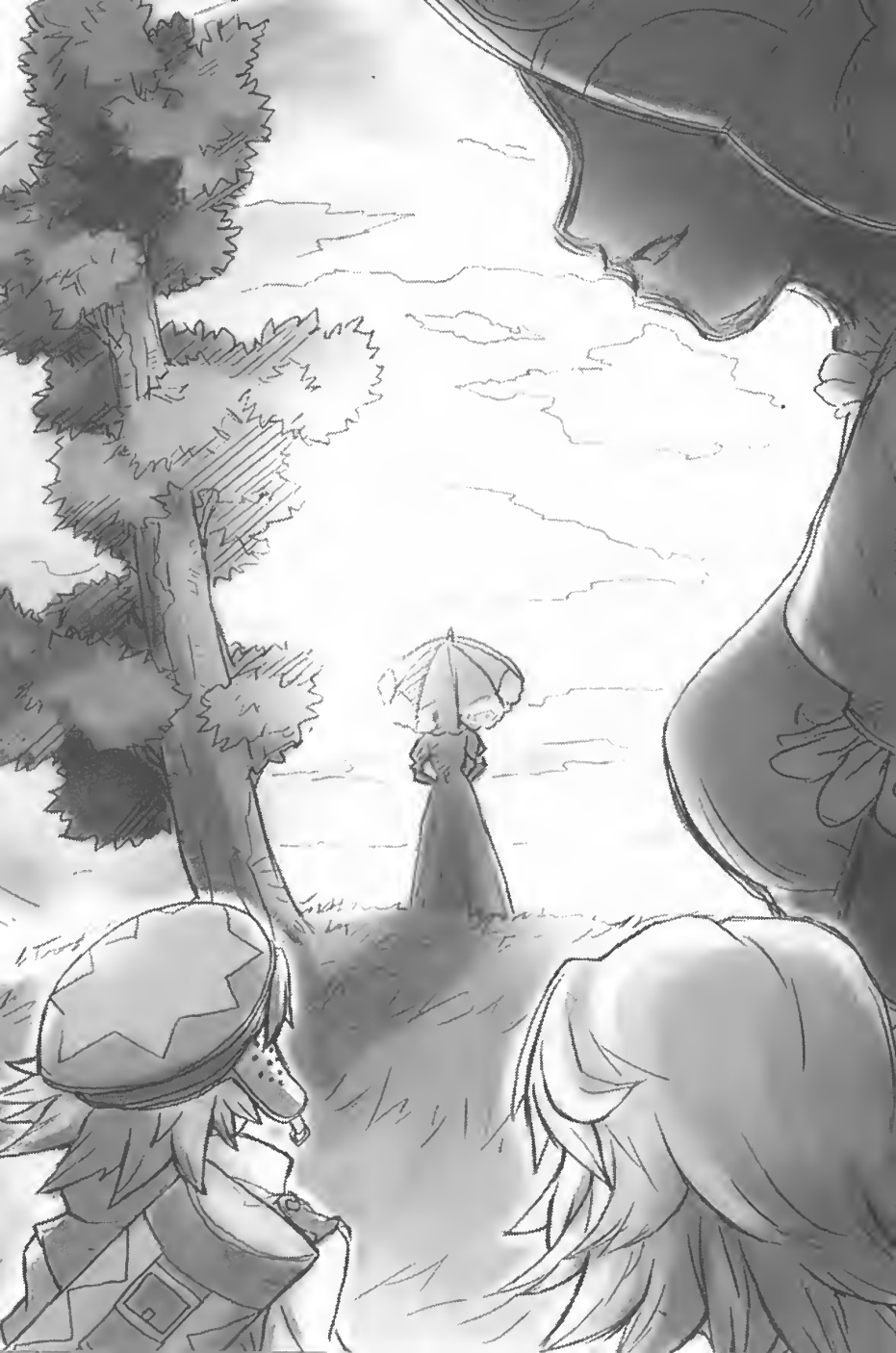
"Who do you suppose it means by 'you'?"

"If it's about Cubia, then maybe Aura?"

"Why couldn't it mean you, Kite?" I said.

"Me?" Kite sounded doubtful.

"Well, I guess not," I said. "Maybe I'm digging a bit too deep here."



.hack // Another Birth

Just what *was* Cubia's goal in not allowing Kite to meet with Aura? Was it to prevent something irreversible that would happen if they did meet?

As I pondered that question, Kite said, "Well, we might as well head back for now."

I nodded nervously to him, and we returned to Fort Ouph. When we arrived there, I saw someone I didn't expect. He was standing there, looking helpless. "Elk!"

Elk didn't even greet us but said, "Mia's nowhere to be found," sounding on the verge of tears. The way he said it, he could have been looking for her nonstop since the last time we'd seen him.

"Oh, you can't get in touch with her, either," I said.

That reminded Kite of something, and he looked straight at me. "Oh, yeah, BlackRose—didn't you say you wanted to talk with Mia about something?"

"Ah, yeah. I did," I said noncommittally.

"Elk, maybe Mia quit playing the game," Kite said. As far as I knew, he assumed Mia was a player character, so it was a completely natural suggestion.

"She wouldn't do that!" Elk declared forcefully; then he fell into an awkward silence.

I thought of voicing support for Kite's suggestion; but knowing Elk's feelings, I couldn't bring myself to do it. I wondered what I should do. I wanted to talk to Mia, and Elk also was looking for her. I had the feeling that coordinating our search would increase our probability of meeting up with her.

the_entrustment_of_hope

Besides, Mia always would try to protect Elk. If Macha, our next major opponent, did turn out to be Mia . . . and if Elk was there with us . . . the Macha that was Mia might not want to fight. Perhaps then we would get the chance to talk.

"I know!" I said. "You should give us a hand, Elk! If Mia's still here, that might be how we meet up with her."

As if digesting my words, Elk slowly looked up from the ground. "Help you? With what?" he murmured.

"Well, things have been getting kind of weird in The World lately, right?" I said. "We've been investigating why it's gotten this way."

"Oh," Elk said, pondering. "Yeah. Okay." He turned and looked straight at Kite. "Mia seems to be attracted to unusual events. Would you let me help, too?"

Kite turned to face him and smiled. "That decides it," said Kite.

Elk smiled in return and warped out.

"I'm sorry, I asked him without talking it over with you first," I told Kite.

"Eh?" he said. "It's okay. I think we'll be better off having Elk with us than if we were just searching randomly."

"Thanks."

"No, thank *you*," Kite said, smiling. "That was a very BlackRose decision, I think."

"But—" I said, hesitating.

Kite raised an eyebrow.

"Elk thinks this is all just some event," I said.

•hack // Another Birth

Kite nodded. "I never got the chance to explain it to him in detail. He was always with Mia."

"Yeah," I said. "But . . . you sure it's okay to get him involved?"

"We won't take him anywhere dangerous."

"Good point." I fell silent, thinking. *Is this really for the best?*

Kite broke the silence. "Well, I'm done for today."

I nodded. "Okay. Take care." I watched Kite log off; then I was left alone with my worries. *If Mia is Macha . . .* I had blurted that out back there so suddenly, and if we ended up having to fight Macha . . . it would mean I had advised Elk to do something horrible. But if there was a chance we would see Mia, Elk would probably come no matter how dangerous it was.

I found myself quickly coming to regret having invited him.

Mia's True Character●

I dreamed. It was the same dream that had prompted me to come to The World in the first place. I never thought I would have that dream again. . . .

There she was, with rose petals scattered all around and clad in a black evening dress—that other me in the middle of the wilderness. Blood oozed from rose-thorn scratches on her arms and legs. Her blank face was expressionless; she had nothing to say, nothing to give me. We stood there, wordless in the darkness. I could feel the heat radiating from her body.

No other details of the dream stuck with me when I woke, but a lingering heartwarming emotion put me in a good mood—until I was reminded of that other dream, the one Mia had talked about having.

But what *about* Mia? And why had Aromatic Grass prompted her to talk about it? In her dream, she had been called “Macha.” How must that have felt, being called by a different name? And who was it who did the calling?

hack // Another Birth

As I pulled on my school uniform top, I once again regretted inviting Elk on our quest. So great was my regret that it even made me tremble. *Macha is definitely the next Phase in line if they keep coming in order. Knowing that, why did I go and invite Elk?*

I looked out the window and sighed deeply. The sky was the gray, lifeless color of full winter—and somewhere along the line since I'd awakened, the warm feeling from my dream had vanished.

School that morning was filled with the buzz of students who had finished all their finals and were now eagerly counting down the days until winter break started. My test results had been worse than my friends'. And in the competition for winter tennis season starter spots, I had lost to Natori, who was doing quite well after her attitude adjustment. I also didn't care about any of the winter break events that my friends were so anxiously awaiting.

I must not have been doing a very good job of hiding my lack of excitement, because Shouko kept trying to draw me into different lines of conversation, but all I could do was smile at her wanly. Shouko knew about Fumikazu, and there was sadness in her eyes as I made noncommittal responses.

Between exams and winter break, we had class only in the morning, but there was no way I could go straight home and log on to The World—I still had tennis club practice in the afternoon, even though I was no longer a starter. But our coach wasn't a slave driver, so he ended practice before sunset.

As I was carting the net and some other equipment to the storage room, Asaoka came up from behind, carrying the tennis ball

cage. "Feeling let down after getting dropped from the starters?" she said.

"Huh? No, it's nothing like that."

She worriedly peered at my face. "Are you sure?"

I was worried, but not about tennis. I was worried that Mia was Macha, our likely next opponent; I was worried about Harald's note, about Fidchell's ominous prediction—and I was wondering whether I should tell Asaoka.

Maybe she could sense that, because she said, "Did you find out something else?" I was silent; perhaps that confirmed her hunch. "You already told me everything that happened up until the last time we talked," she said. "Please let me see it through to the end with you."

So we walked and talked about what had happened in *The World* since the battle with Fidchell. Though I kept backtracking—and probably added too many details—Asaoka kept encouraging me to go on, and I eventually spun out the whole tale.

As she was stowing the tennis balls, Asaoka said, "Can I . . . tell Hagiya the news?"

I paused warily. "All right," I said slowly, unintentionally looking in the direction of the music room where Hagiya probably was. Then a troubling thought crossed my mind—*Hagiya wouldn't ever decide to check out The World on his own, would he?*

Considering how strong-willed he was, I couldn't say for sure that he definitely wouldn't ever log in. *Maybe I should warn him again not to*, I thought; then I realized that might backfire and prompt him to log on out of sheer orneriness.

.hack // Another Birth

“Calling the network trouble the other day a coincidence would be overly optimistic, wouldn’t it?” Asaoka murmured, startling me—and I couldn’t meet her gaze.

It’s not like I’m trying to cause problems like that, I thought. The effort to resolve this chain of events that centered on Kite had even brought a CC Corp. administrator to work together with a hacker, and normal players who should have been off enjoying the game were doing all they could to work things through—but so far, we’d had little to show for it.

The guilt and frustration I was feeling must have been written on my face, because Asaoka’s voice turned deliberately cheerful. “Don’t worry about it so much, Asaoka. What will be, will be.”

What will be, will be. The words echoed in my mind as I went home. *Is that really the way things are?* They were dangerous words. If only fate was going to determine what happened no matter how hard we strove, then our struggle was meaningless. But even if that was true, I wasn’t about to just sit back and let things happen. I had to do whatever I could to try and change things to the way I knew they should be.

I was already trying as hard as I could. Had I worked so hard only to reach a point where I could say, “what will be, will be”?

Not yet. I feel like there’s still something I can do. But because there was no sign yet that the end result would be the outcome I was most anxious for, I brooded.

Would it make it any easier if I thought of the outcome as determined by fate? Would it help me face my next battle with less

trepidation? Perhaps. But changing my feelings wasn't as easy as pushing a button in a computer game.

Though I was filled with anxiety about our coming confrontation with Macha, I headed for my computer as soon as I arrived home.



Before logging in, I checked my mail, but there were no messages concerning the operation—no summons from Wiseman. Nor were there any important posts on the BBS. So when I logged in, I left Fort Ouph, where I'd last seen Elk and Kite, and transferred to Lia Fail to visit the town's shops.

I'd run out of recovery items and scrolls during our trip to Σ: Screaming, Wind Sand's, Fate Castle, where Spiritas had told us to check out the strange room, so I restocked with as many as I could afford. I needed to make sure we would be prepared for any dangerous situation.

I also recently had been made painfully aware of how low my character level was; so, I figured that while we were waiting for a summons, I could use the time to level up alone.

The area I gated to showed the typical signs of virus contamination, so I took great care as I advanced through the field and the dungeon until I found the Gott Statue at its lowest level. I was wary that a Data Bug might emerge from one of the magical portals; but as I went back and forth between the town

•hack // Another Birth

and the area over and over, my worry dissipated in the mechanical routine.

How many times does this make? I wondered to myself as I gated back to the area once again—when I realized someone else was there. Someone *very* familiar.

“Mia!” I cried, starting toward her. Hearing me, she turned in my direction—and her cold expression stopped me in my tracks, my hand extended partway.

If Mia is Macha . . . “You okay?” I said, anxiety adding a tremble to my voice.

She just stared at me in complete silence.

I hurriedly said, “E-Elk is looking for you. He was really worried—he thought maybe you had quit the game.” When not even the word *Elk* drew any sort of reaction, I said, “Mia . . . ? Have you forgotten about Elk, even?”

I stared at her face as she pondered the name, and then she slowly murmured, “Elk.” It was then that her expression finally changed—to one of agony. “I . . . can’t see . . . Elk anymore,” she said, as if forcing out the words. “I must not see him.”

I cocked my head. *What does that mean?* “You *must* not?”

As I stood there looking at her, she gated out as if running away.

“Hey, hold on!” I cried—but my voice just echoed in the space she had vacated.

I considered sending an e-mail to Elk right away but decided against it. Telling him the words she had so painfully squeezed out would only be cruel. Mia’s decision not to see

Elk—it was almost like a breakup. And pain is involved anytime a parting of ways isn't mutual—all the more so if the other person is important to you.

No longer caring about leveling up, I just sat and pondered for a while.

I was about to log out and call it a night when my computer notified me that an e-mail had arrived. The message was from Wiseman, saying that the next operation was ready to be carried out. After going back to town to replenish the items I'd used while leveling up, I immediately headed to Net Slum for the meeting.

My bed was calling, but it would be hours until I got any rest.



When I arrived in Net Slum, I saw Elk standing alongside Wiseman, Balmung, and Helba. Wiseman had said the next operation was set, which probably meant we would fight one of the Phases—Macha. And Elk would be there to fight at our side. That's what I had gotten him into by inviting him to help out.

He looked out of place and was glancing around nervously. *What will be, will be*—Asaoka's words echoed again in my mind. Some part of me could not believe that, but I forced my conscious self to accept it for the time being. I couldn't let worry hamper my actions.

I greeted everyone; then I looked around and said, "Umm . . . So, Kite's still not here?"

.hack // Another Birth

"He probably will be here soon," Wiseman said.

Balmung laughed. "Speak of the devil! Look."

I followed his gaze and saw transfer rings finish depositing the object of my inquiry.

Kite greeted everyone; then he said, "Where's Lios?"

I hadn't even noticed Lios wasn't there! I'd been so preoccupied upon seeing Elk that I'd just assumed Lios was hanging around Helba and Wiseman. *I can't let myself miss important details like that!*

"The pighead's getting into position with his subordinates," Helba told Kite. She nodded to Wiseman, who took her cue.

"We've confirmed from said pighead's report that the Wave's appearance is not random," Wiseman said. "Lios' subordinates have positioned themselves in areas where the Wave appears frequently. Once they catch sight of it, we'll begin fencing it in, using the vaccine to restrict the direction of its movement. We'll herd the Wave to Ω: Cruel, Vindictive, Scars, and then we'll crush it." It sounded like the plan was to make use of the tactic Kite had explained before—how killer whales drive their prey to the surface.

I could feel the anxiety start to tickle at my heart, but I knew that we were all in this together, and that it would all work out.

At least that's what I told myself.

"All of you are to stand by at the lowest level of Ω: Cruel, Vindictive, Scars," Helba said, and we nodded.

But just as we were all keyed up to go, Wiseman turned to Kite and said, "Now then, Kite—the name of this operation?"

Kite smiled and looked at each of us. He cried in a clear voice, "Commence Operation Orca!"

"Affirmative!" Balmung, Wiseman, and the others called out simultaneously—but my nervousness was taking root, and I was unable to respond.

"Well, Ω: Cruel, Vindictive, Scars is protected," said Helba, handing Kite something—probably a virus core, considering she used the word "protected."

"Make use of this," Helba said.

"Thanks," Kite said, accepting it into his inventory.

"Be careful," Helba said, putting her hand on his shoulder. Her words resounded strongly in my heart, as well.

"Operation Orca—a good name," said Balmung, and Kite smiled.

Leaving Wiseman and Helba behind in Net Slum, Kite, Balmung, Elk, and I returned to Carmina Gadelica. That was one too many of us—the maximum party amount in The World was limited to three. Kite with his bracelet was the core of the operation, so of course he would go—but he had to pick among the three of us.

Who's Kite going to leave behind?

I silently wished Elk would be spared this fight, but he pleaded vigorously to go. "Take me with you!"

I started composing a Flash Mail to Kite:

>This could be the Macha fight, you know.

•hack // Another Birth

But before I could send it, Kite added Elk to his party . . . and then me—BlackRose. Balmung made no comment about not being picked—perhaps he had been told about Elk's situation.

"BlackRose?" Kite said, and I hurriedly turned toward him. "You ready?"

We're beyond the time to ask questions. Let's just get on with it. "I'm fine on items. I can go anytime."

"Me, too," Elk said timidly.

"Then let's go!" Kite cried, and Elk and I nodded.

"Be careful!" Balmung said, looking at us each in turn.

"Yeah," said Kite. "See you!" And the image in our party's FMDs switched to the gate-hacking screen. Kite inserted virus cores into the four crystals found there—I assumed the one Helba had given him was included in their number. Elk and I silently waited for him to finish.

The one who had taught Kite how to hack into protected areas . . . was Mia. How had that made her feel at the time? Elk, who was always by Mia's side, must have been there when she had taught Kite. As Elk and I watched Kite break the protection, was it a painful reminder for him? We were using the method Mia had taught—and we were very possibly using it in order to catch her in our trap.

Kite filled all the recesses in the crystal with his virus cores, and the warp process completed. The scene spread before us now was very familiar: Here and there on the deep red magma plain, contaminated scorches stained the ground. Long, narrow streams of characters crept through the sky.



.hack // Another Birth

As if to assure us as we took in that ominous scene, the voice of Lios spoke to us from the background. "The Wave will be heading that way shortly. Be fully on your guard!"

"Roger!" Kite said, brandishing his twin blades. Then he looked at each of us in turn. "Okay, let's get to the lowest level of the dungeon."

We nodded, and Kite led the way. Elk acted as support from the rear; in front, Kite and I made short work of any monsters we came across. The trip through the dungeon was an easy one—but when we got to the lowest level, there was nothing there. No purple mist, no Data Bug, no nothing. Only silence accompanied the bare stone walls.

"There's nothing here?" Kite murmured.

As if in response, Lios' voice spoke again. "Something strange is happening. . . . The Wave is not moving as predicted in response to being herded."

Something strange?

"Lios, what do you mean?" Kite asked immediately.

"The data capacity is . . . decreasing! It's gone! Target vanished. I don't understand why . . ." The voice trailed off.

Like we understood any better than him! "What's going on?!" I shouted, if only to keep the creepy silence from returning to that desolate place. My voice reverberated throughout the dungeon. *What about the operation?!*

Now Helba's voice sounded in our ears. "Confirming abnormal increase in the data capacity of Σ : Graceful, Tempting, Fallen Angel! If you leave at once, you'll get there in time! Go! Σ : Graceful, Tempting, Fallen Angel! Hurry!"

In the past she always had seemed unflappable, but now there was urgency in her voice. We weren't sure why; but, nevertheless, Kite used an item to return us to the field, and we traveled to the indicated area after switching root towns. It wasn't a protected area, but it was still contaminated.

"So, to the dungeon?" I said.

Kite nodded; then he turned to Elk. "Elk, you all right?"

"Yeah," Elk said hesitantly as he stood rooted to the spot behind me.

"Are you feeling okay?" I said, looking at him—but the image of his avatar offered no clues.

He turned his face from my gaze and murmured, "I want to see Mia." He forced the words out and gripped his staff tightly.

That's right, I thought, reminding myself that Elk's interest in our quest was due only to the chance that we might run across Mia. Whether we met friend or foe, anything that didn't bring us closer to Mia meant nothing to Elk.

Kite and I stood there perplexed for a while as Elk showed no signs of movement. Helba had said to hurry, and I wanted to get there before whatever had noticed us in the other field and run off in this direction decided to bolt again. But we couldn't leave Elk just standing there, so we waited, not having moved at all from the point where we'd warped in.

After an interminable silence, Elk finally, slowly, raised his head. "Sorry," he said. "Let's go."

"You're okay?" I asked—not that I knew what had been wrong in the first place.

•hack // Another Birth

But Elk nodded at my words. “Yeah.”

Kite brandished his twin blades again and took off running. Elk and I were hot on his tail. Finding the dungeon entrance easily, we rushed inside. There were few magical portals inside the dungeon; but what monsters emerged had high levels, so we advanced cautiously.

But something was wrong—Elk was acting as support, but his reaction time was slow. Kite turned and faced him. “You sure you’re okay?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Elk said. “I . . . have a feeling that Mia is here.”

“Just don’t force yourself to do something you’re not up for,” I said, and Elk nodded.

There was no way that Mia would just happen to be somewhere we had chased one of the Phases. *What’s here isn’t Mia—it’s Macha.*

My footfalls were heavy as we descended to the lowest level. Helba had told us to hurry, so there was no way we could turn back now. It was unfair for Elk to have to be involved, but all we could do was press on. Kite and I kept making sure that Elk was following us from behind.

Suspended in front of the hindmost room on the lowest level of the dungeon was a wavering, light purple mist. I stopped to prepare for combat . . . when Elk slipped past Kite and me and stepped forward.

“Elk?!” I cried—but he disappeared into the mist. “Let’s follow him!”

With no time to cast recovery or strengthening magic, Kite and I plunged into the room after Elk.

Normally, after passing through the mist, we would find ourselves transported to some other place—but this time, to our shock and surprise, we were faced with just an ordinary dungeon room. But it wasn't empty—Mia was there, squatting on the ground and clutching her knees. Standing beside her was Elk, hopelessly at a loss for words.

Kite and I approached them nervously. *I have a bad feeling about this*, I thought. All my suspicions were pretty much confirmed. Lios and Helba had said that one of the eight Phases of the Wave was here—and it was Mia who had awaited us in the final room.

I Flash Mailed Kite.

>Hey . . .

>>Hm?

>Is it a coincidence that Mia's here?

>> . . . I don't think so.

>Do you think Mia is Macha, too?

Wordlessly, Kite turned from scrutinizing Mia to look at me.

>>I want to think that's not the case . . .

Kite returned his focus to Mia, who was just sitting there, holding her head. "Elk . . ." she whispered. "Who am I?"

hack // Another Birth

As we drew closer, Elk paid no attention to us at all, but he smiled at Mia. "You're Mia, of course," he said softly.

Not meeting his gaze, Mia murmured, "I have no memory."

There was no way her behavior could be explained away as just fatigue. Seeing her like that made my heart ache; even though there were many things I wanted to ask her, there was nothing I could do in that situation.

Are we too late? Not able to find any words, I stood back and watched Mia and Elk attentively.

As Elk stood there silently, Mia began to tremble as she held her head. "It's true—I exist only in The World," she whispered. "The only memory I have is when I am in the . . ." Her body shook even more than before, in ways that were not among the game's built-in expression commands—no controller movement could have produced such results.

Feeling powerless to react, I just stood there. The shaking wasn't some status abnormality, the result of an in-game poison or spell; I couldn't cure it with an item. Maybe things that deviated from the rule set of The World—things like the abilities of Kite's bracelet—could not be fixed according to the rules.

I looked at Kite's bracelet, which—as if reacting to something—calmly blinked on and off. But what was it reacting to?

Suddenly, Mia's head began to shake crazily, and her trembling crescendoed in convulsions. "No! Stop it!" she shouted in a harsh voice.

"Mia!" Elk cried out.

Mia's changed voice shouted again, "I . . . want to keep being me!"

Kite ran toward her, leaving my side. She flinched at the sound of his footfalls.

"Stay back!" she cried. "Don't . . . don't look at me!"

"Mia!" Kite called—but it wasn't the Mia we knew who his voice reached.

A red light flashed from her body. Engulfed by the light, her character emitted colors across the spectrum. The shape was still Mia's, but the surface of her body was completely wrapped in the light and her features were impossible to distinguish. Worst of all, within the light, strings of characters raced around at wild speeds.

The being of light who had been Mia turned slowly in Elk's direction. "Elk . . ." she said. "I'm sorry."

Elk wordlessly shook his head.

If Mia meant to say anything else, we never heard it. Instead, something spread in all directions from where Mia sat—something pink, with the texture of gills. Elk and Kite, who had been close to her, stumbled backward from it. From where I stood at some distance, all I could do was stare in blank amazement.

Before our eyes, Mia was transforming into Macha, and we were there to fight her—but how could Kite and I prepare our hearts for such a task?

Elk probably had no idea that Mia was anything other than herself. When I thought about what he must have been feeling, it made the situation unbearable.

hack // Another Birth

Mia . . .

The gills extending from Mia's base went out for several meters, and then they slowly curled up, with her luminescent figure at their center. Before our eyes the shape formed a pink sphere like a flower bud; in the blink of an eye, the barren dungeon room transformed into the scenery where we always faced off against the Phases. I ignored the urge to look around, keeping my eyes nailed to the pink sphere that Kite and Elk were still backing away from. Glad that I had kept my distance, I saw the sphere begin to open slowly, like a flower blooming. Noise rent the air around us, and the earth shook. Fighting the urge to tear the FMD goggles from my face, I found my eyes riveted to the sphere.

So, Mia really was Macha after all.

Within half a minute, the bud had blossomed completely; inside it, Mia was nowhere to be seen. In her place, all that remained was the upper half of a white-eyed woman—or at least, I assumed it was female from the way the breasts stuck out. From the hips down, it was all spreading gills, making it look like a seated figure in a long, flowing dress.

The figure in the center of the circle opened her mouth and yelled—sending a shock wave out in all directions. I covered my head with both arms to fend it off; Elk thrust his staff into the ground and hung onto it desperately to keep from being blown away. Still under the full brunt of the shock wave, I stared at Macha. She was . . . looking at Elk.

"Miaaaaa!" Elk screamed—but it was futile. A flash of red light coiled around his image; it coiled and tightened, squeezing him until Elk's figure burst apart in glowing strings of characters. His name vanished from the status bar at the bottom of the display, leaving only Kite and me in the party.

>Elk?!

I typed furiously, shooting him a Flash Mail, hoping against hope that he would respond. And he promptly did.

>>Where's Mia?

>Elk . . . calm down. Are you all right?

>>Where am I? I've got to hurry and get back to Mia!

>Elk . . . You're okay, right?

>>Forget about me--what about Mia?!

I looked at the figure of Macha looming before Kite and me. In it, there was no trace of the kind Mia that Elk had known for so long.

I always had considered white lies to be hypocritical; but at the moment, calming Elk down seemed to be more important than

.hack // Another Birth

telling the truth. He seemed to be safe where he was, considering he could use Flash Mail, but I was worried about what Macha had done to him.

>Mia seems to be all right. But more important, are you okay?

>>Mia! I'm coming right back!

>Coming back? Where are you?

>>In front of the dungeon, I think.

He's by the dungeon entrance? I wondered. Had Macha . . . no, Mia, not wanting Elk to understand her true identity, transported him outside the dungeon with the last bit of her reason left before her transformation was complete? If that was so, then Elk was special to her after all.

>>I can't get into the dungeon! What should I do?! Mia's in the dungeon, isn't she?

He can't get in? I never had heard of a dungeon entrance being protected. But for Mia, who knew how to cancel area protections, putting a protection on a dungeon entrance probably was no trouble at all.

mia's_true_character

>She is.

I gazed at Macha.

>She's right in front of me. . . .

>I'll get there one way or another! Don't let Mia go anywhere!

There was such pain evident behind his words that I was unable to respond.

I timidly spoke to Kite, who was now standing beside me. "Elk was thrown outside the dungeon."

"So, he's okay?"

"He's upset, but he seems all right."

Kite nodded. "Okay."

Now that we knew Elk was safe, we stared confrontationally at Macha—and in an instant, a purple wave filled our displays, wriggling wildly in the center. With the appearance of the wave, the Flash Mail interface went unresponsive.

The wave's appearance was the harbinger of a Phase—and in front of the wave was the beautiful white-eyed woman, Macha.

The two of us hesitated before her. "Kite . . ." I said uneasily.

Kite readied his twin blades and nodded. "I know."

Mia was Macha. Without hesitation, Macha charged at us. Unsure what to do, I readied my massive sword. If it was at all

.hack // Another Birth

possible, I didn't want to fight. When I thought about Elk, all urge to fight drained away. And as if Kite felt the same way, he just stood there.

"At this rate . . ." he whispered, and I mentally filled in the rest.

We'll be wiped out.

So I cast recovery and strengthening magic to start out. I didn't feel like fighting—but it was kill or be killed, and we had to keep ourselves from being taken out. Although I knew that, I couldn't make my body attack her.

At my side, Kite showed none of my indecision as he slashed at Macha with his twin blades.

"Kite," I shouted, "that's Mia!"

Kite choked out a grieved response as he slashed away. "Mia's suffering. We have to save her. . . ."

"Save her?" I cried. "How, using that?" I looked at Kite's flashing bracelet.

"It's the only thing I *can* do," he said, firing off attack skills repeatedly.

"Kite . . ." Seeing his determination, I turned my own sword toward Macha and glared at her. *Is this something possessing Mia? Or was she Macha all along?*

I felt bad for Elk, but I turned my sword on Macha and charged.

Kite and I never had faced a Phase without a third party member. Though we had plenty of recovery items, if we didn't use them prudently, our hit points would soon be depleted. So we



.hack // Another Birth

doggedly kept up our attack, whittling away at Macha's hit points until Kite could Data Drain.

Each time we cut at Macha, it cried out bitterly. The image in my FMD blurred, and I reached through a gap to wipe away a tear.

We were fighting in earnest now, and Macha suddenly held up one arm. To our shock and dismay, a bracelet like Kite's appeared on that arm—and Kite's body rose into the air.

"Kite!" I screamed. I somehow had made it through being Data Drained several times, but if Kite did not, and he ended up comatose . . . I didn't think that would happen, but anxiety wracked me. Unable to take my eyes off his floating form, I opened my inventory menu so I could use recovery items on him without delay.

The Data Drain hit—and icons indicating paralysis, charm, poison, sleep, and confusion lined up in Kite's status bar. I quickly used the recovery items I had lined up, and the icons winked out.

"Thanks," Kite said.

"That was a merciless attack." I eyed Macha as it slowly moved away from us, dragging its gills.

"Looks like it's totally forgotten it's Mia," Kite said, looking at the Phase.

"Yeah." I nodded. Mia had forgotten herself *and* us.

We regrouped briefly; then we approached again and attacked. Macha repeatedly fired back at us with attack spells.

Suddenly, the words "Suspicious Seduction" scrolled by in the log.

What?

It was a spell I wasn't familiar with, and the number of hit points it stole from us was not very high—but it left me charmed, and I found myself attacking Kite like I was under someone else's control.

"Kite, run!" I cried—but he had been hit by the same spell, so on our screens the characters of BlackRose and Kite started fighting, almost wiping each other out before we could get them back under control.

"Should one of us hang back and do recovery?" I said, using a recovery item. "If we're both hit by that spell again at the same time, we're done for." If we killed each other and fell into comas, that would be the absolute worst. We had to avoid inflicting friendly damage at all cost.

"Do you have any scrolls, BlackRose?" Kite asked.

I checked my inventory. Thanks to the time I'd spent leveling up, I'd gathered up quite a number of them. "I've got plenty of attack magic scrolls," I said.

"Could I have some?"

I shot him a questioning glance.

"I'll hang back to do recovery, and attack from afar at the same time."

"Gotcha." It was a good plan, so I gave Kite the scrolls as a gift. My attack power was higher, so it made more sense for me to fight from the front than for Kite to.

From my weapon inventory I selected the sword with the highest attack power and equipped it. Whether I lived or died now depended entirely on Kite. "It's up to you!" I cried as I ran after

.hack // Another Birth

Macha. Focusing entirely on attack skills, I left all recovery and rear support to Kite. And then, circling Macha, a luminescent green sphere appeared. "Kite, there it is!" I shouted. Beside the sphere appeared the text "Protect Break OK."

Kite ran to an angle with a clear shot at the Phase. He lifted his right braceleted arm and set his sights on Macha. "Mia, I'm sorry," he murmured—and an arrow of light fired from the bracelet, piercing Macha's chest. As with the other enemies we had fought before, the Data Drain turned it to stone—in this case, nine stones of various sizes strung together with tattered pieces of cloth, arranged vaguely in a shape resembling Macha's prior form. Kite ran up to the stone Macha; without so much as a glance at each other, we wordlessly whittled away at its hit points. Its six thousand hit points decreased steadily until they vanished; then, with a final yell, Macha began to crumble away.

Watching, I muttered, "Mia . . ." And then I heard Kite's stupefied voice cry, "What?" I followed his upward gaze and saw Mia slowly floating down from above. Kite ran to her probable landing point, and I followed after him.

Mia's come back! I thought—but the Mia that Kite cradled in his arms upon her landing did not even open her eyes.

"Mia . . . What have you done with Mia?" Elk's voice came from behind us as we peered at her face. When we turned around to look, Elk was running toward us, staring straight at his old friend.

He got into the dungeon? I figured the protection must have lifted after Macha's defeat. "Elk," I said, looking at him worriedly, but he

ignored me and chanted a recovery spell over Mia. *If only that would work*, I thought, my heart breaking. Elk just kept using spells on Mia's unresponsive form. Unable to watch, I quietly backed away. Kite peered into Mia's face . . . and she slowly opened her eyes. Her head languidly moved to face Elk's direction.

"Oh, Elk," she whispered. "Thank you." And then she smiled, her body disintegrating into a cloud of light particles that ascended into the sky of the abnormal area. All Kite, Elk, and I could do was watch as they slowly disappeared upward.

Lios' voice shattered our solemn moment. "The data that vanished has returned. We're resuming the operation! Go back to Ω: Cruel, Vindictive, Scars!"

I stared at Kite, who caught my gaze and stood up. *We can't stop now*. My logical mind knew that, but my emotional self was dragging its feet. Mia was Macha, and we could not deny that we had just crushed Macha. The particles of light that Mia had burst into vanished completely, and Elk began tottering off randomly. "Elk, Mia's—" Kite cried out to stop him; but at the moment, Elk's ears were deaf to suggestion.

"Just leave me alone!" Elk spat out, his back turned toward us; then he warped out. I wanted to follow him. I had nothing to say to him that would help—but still, I wanted to be by his side. We were still in the middle of an operation, though.

"Did you hear me?" Lios' voice shouted. "Hurry back to the previous area!" The sound of it echoed in the empty spot I couldn't take my eyes off, where Elk had stood just a moment before.





Each Resolution●

“Where’s he gone, anyway?” Balmung said when Kite, he, and I warped to Ω: Cruel, Vindictive, Scars, where the Wave was supposed to have fled.

I assumed Balmung was asking about Elk.

Elk’s withdrawal from the operation was easy to understand—he had seen only that our actions had resulted in Mia’s dissolution. I wanted to follow him, to find him, to be with him in his time of need. But whether or not Lios’ voice was there to shout at us, we had an operation to complete, and there was no time to get sidetracked.

Balmung had stood by in Net Slum while we fought Macha; now he had come to Ω: Cruel, Vindictive, Scars to continue the operation with us. We added him to our party in place of Elk.

Spreading out before us was a field of deep red, magmalike earth, contaminated with scorchlike stains here and there. Long,

.hack // Another Birth

narrow progressions of symbols crept through the air. We ran through the field, making a beeline for the dungeon.

As we hadn't answered Balmung's first question, he threw out another one. "I suppose it'll be there this time?"

The Wave had escaped on our previous trip there, and the lowest level had been barren. But this time had to be different—it had to be there. Lios and Helba weren't the types to let a target get away from them twice.

I never had considered that we would end up fighting both Macha and her successor Tarvos in the same night. "You heard Lios' voice in Lia Fail, didn't you?" I said to Balmung. We had stopped in town briefly to restock, meeting Balmung there. "That's the whole reason we've come, because this time it's going to be here."

The seldom-disarrayed Lios had sounded atypically rushed. "The Wave has been activated," he'd said. "Hurry and head for it!"

"Looks like all we can do for now is hurry," Balmung said, hefting his sword and heading into the dungeon. Kite and I nodded. We had just been there, so we remembered the layout. We would be able to take the shortest route possible to the lowest level.

As we enthusiastically stepped forward, a transmission from Lios came in. "Have you seen Elk?"

At that name, I looked at Kite. I myself wanted to know where Elk had gone, and I figured Kite felt the same way.

"We separated from Elk at Σ : Graceful, Tempting, Fallen Angel," Kite said. "What about him?"

We had no idea where Elk had gone, and no way of finding out.

"He's left his post and taken the vaccine with him!" Lios' irritated voice cried. "At this rate, herding will be—" A sudden noise drowned out whatever else he had meant to say.

Will be what?

"Lios!" Kite called. "We can't hear you, Lios!" He called again and again, but no answer came. The noise ceased, but it was replaced only by silence.

Kite looked back and forth between Balmung and me. "Well, let's keep going," he said eventually.

"Sure," I said. Just because the transmission had gotten cut off didn't mean the operation had ended. We psyched ourselves back up and descended into the dungeon.

Even though we had no Wavemaster, I found that the anxiety that had so pressed down on me last time was gone. Balmung was there. Kite was there. I had all the equipment I needed, within reason. We didn't know what form our opponent would take this time, but the three of us had fought at one another's sides before, so I knew we could do it.

But . . . it bothered me that we hadn't heard the rest of what Lios had to say. What if because Elk had gone somewhere with the vaccine, herding had become impossible? Well, we had already come so far without a vaccine. So, we should be fine . . . but I couldn't swear to it.

The Phases were becoming more complex. There was the one that had talked like it was a god, and the one that had come at us looking like twins. Because we had decided it would be impossible

.hack // Another Birth

to continue our struggle against increasingly difficult foes without help, we had teamed up with Lios, Helba, and the others. But if our support team were no longer there . . .

We arrived in front of the room, where there had been nothing waiting previously. This time, mist hung in the doorway, just as we expected.

"This is it," Balmung said, casting strengthening magic on the party members using his scrolls and items. Sparkling visual effects rained down on us, one after the other.

Looking up at the sparkles as they fell, I murmured to myself, "What are we supposed to do?"

"If you think about what you want to become, what you should do will become obvious to you," my father had said once. I understood that I had to focus on the task at hand, but I couldn't help but be bothered by where Elk had gone and what Lios had been unable to communicate.

Kite peered at my face. "If it's not there, we can just go back to town," he told me.

"He's right," Balmung agreed. "There's no point getting worked up over it."

Yet it was clear to me that I wasn't the only one who was worried—Kite and Balmung also were clearly uneasy. So, I firmed my resolve and said confidently, "Right. Let's get this over with and hurry back to town." Smiling, I brandished my massive sword and plunged through the misty doorway.

The moment I entered, severe noise rang through the room—mixed with Lios' voice. "I'm suspending the operation," he said.

Huh? Why?

"Suspending?" Kite said, visibly drained. He lowered his twin blades and tilted his head.

"It ate the vaccine and made a damned antibody," Lios' voice continued. "My men are wiped out. Return to Ω server root town."

Wiped out? I slowly digested Lios' words.

"Wiped out?" Kite said, shocked. "You don't mean . . ." He looked at me; I could only shake my head.

As far as we knew, any player character not in a party with the bracelet bearer who got defeated by a Data Bug—or one of the eight Phases like Skeith—was doomed to fall comatose. So, by "wiped out," Lios meant . . .

"Can you hear me?!" Lios' voice called. "Return to Lia—" Again his voice was drowned out by intense noise.

"What's going on?" Balmung yelled to me as we ran over to Kite, who was calling out Lios' name over and over.

"I don't know," I answered him, looking around. "But isn't this noise bad news?" The noise intensified—and, suddenly, the display's colors inverted.

A chill ran through my body. *Something is coming.*

A point in the air distorted like an expanding ripple. I couldn't take my eyes off it. Ready my massive sword, I gazed at the wavering air. *Is it Tarvos?*

I anxiously looked to Kite at my side—and saw a red sphere arise from around his chest. "What is that?" I breathed as I looked

.hack // Another Birth

back at the wavering spot in the air—and there was Aura, floating majestically in midair, her eyes closed. The crimson sphere that rose up from Kite was absorbed into Aura's floating form, and she slowly opened her eyes—dazzling turquoise orbs that looked around her as if making sure of where she was, assessing the situation.

Her eyes rested on me.

Maybe now we can talk with her, I thought. I stepped forward like she was drawing me toward her—and, suddenly, another transmission from Lios rang out.

“What? What’s going on? The momentum of the Wave . . . has stopped! We can do it!”

“The Wave?” I queried, turning to look at Kite. *Is Aura one of the eight Phases?!*

Kite and Balmung seemed just as clueless as me. Amid the intense noise, I turned Lios’ words over and over in my jumbled mind. *Is Aura a Phase . . . or does she perhaps have the ability to keep the Phases from moving?*

Her eyes, which had been looking around, now focused on one spot. I followed her gaze; then I tightly grasped my sword. In the spot where Aura was looking, familiar pale tree roots were entwining up, one after another. They were even larger than they’d been the last time we’d seen them, and their tips weren’t visible. It was a development too abnormal to be called growth.

Cubia . . .

I squinted at it, and the air was rent by a noise more intense than any we’d previously experienced. We faced Cubia and readied our weapons.

"No! You must run!" Aura's agonized voice cried out. "You can't fight Cubia—" And then she was gone. Vanished. Without saying anything important.

"We'd run away if only we could!" I cried into the space she had vacated.

There was no way we could run, and I didn't see any reason why we should avoid this fight. Still, the way Lios' and Aura's words had been cut off ate away at my gut.

We were suddenly transported from the dungeon to a typically strange battleground, though not the one where we faced off against Phases. I became uneasily aware of the fact that the bracelet attached to Kite's arm currently was aimed at the ground beneath our feet, and it unsettled me.

The three of us had fought Cubia together before, so I wasn't concerned about our combat ability. No, it was Cubia's growth that concerned me. Was its growth based on something else—was it proportional to anything? To what?

"For now, we'd better take care of Cubia," Kite said at my side, strengthening my defense and attributes, as well as Balmung's, with items he had.

"Cubia, the concealed . . ." Balmung muttered as he was clad in the effect of the strengthening magic. He readied his sword and asked, "Just what the hell *is* this thing?"

All Kite and I could do was shake our heads. Cubia was the monster that had been born when Skeith got defeated, and it always showed up when Aura showed herself.

•hack // Another Birth

Now, as we watched with bewildered faces, a monster that looked like a smaller version of Cubia appeared before us—the Cubia Core. It began summoning Kill Gomoras, Varias Gomoras, Repth Gomoras, and Downer Gomoras, one after another.

“Do you suppose the same strategy as last time will work?” Kite said.

“Yeah,” said Balmung. “Leave recovery to me.”

Hearing their plan, I left Cubia Core and its physical tolerance for later and plunged among the four types of summoned Gomoras, concentrating on cutting them down. Drawing on my previous experience fighting them, I repeatedly used attack skills.

What if Cubia's not one of the eight Phases? I thought. What if Tarvos shows up right after this?

Whether I worried about it or not, we couldn't advance any farther without beating Cubia. *Never mind advancing—we're in danger right now!* I expended item after item taking down the Gomoras; once those were gone, I struck at Cubia Core over and over. I'd filled my inventory to its limit, so I had a lot of items to use.

Skillfully applying SP-consuming attack skills and scrolls, we whittled away at Cubia Core's HP. I had no skill in shrewdly changing equipment like Balmung or moving nimbly like Kite . . . but there was one stat that I was proud of: my physical attack power. As long as I kept my hit points at a safe level, I could dole out more damage per strike than anyone else. Freely using HP recovery items, I layered attack skill after attack skill against Cubia Core.



.hack // Another Birth

“Rai Divider!” I cried, implementing a thunder-based attack skill. In my display, BlackRose somersaulted into the air and energetically brought her sword down on Cubia Core. Its hit points, which alternated between physical tolerance and magical tolerance, took a massive plunge to almost nothing before shifting to magical tolerance. Kite and Balmung readied attack skills in response.

And then I noticed something strange. “Huh?” Until now, Cubia Core had seemed to be nothing but a monster, but now I noticed that there was someone inside it! “Wait!”

At my voice, Balmung and Kite stopped their attacks. “What’s wrong?” Kite said.

“Look—isn’t there something inside Cubia Core?”

“What?” Balmung said, and the two of them took a good look at the defenseless monster before them. Inside it, a figure squatting and holding its knees in a fetal position was visible. There seemed to be a tube attached to its back.

It looks like Kite, I thought. There were countless numbers of player characters in The World, so it wasn’t unusual for there to be multiple PCs with the same face. But this . . . *Why haven’t we noticed this before?*

Since our attacks had stopped, Cubia Core obstinately started summoning Gomoras.

“Has he been swallowed up?” Kite wondered as we easily defeated what Gomoras appeared.

“No way. Well, I mean . . .” Balmung hesitated.

“Do you know something?” Kite asked.

Balmung paused. Then he said, "Well, doesn't he look like you, Kite?"

"Huh? Me?!" Kite looked closely at the figure within Cubia Core. "I guess there's a resemblance," he said, "but why me?"

"I don't know," Balmung said, brandishing his sword. "I just noticed the resemblance and pointed it out."

"So, what do we do?" I said, nervously readying my sword. Perhaps it was just an AI, but now that I knew there was something inside it—a character who looked like Kite, no less—I began to think that maybe there was more to it.

"Nothing to do but defeat it, right?" said Balmung, raising his sword high. "Crack Beat!" he yelled, using a bisecting one-handed sword attack skill. Cubia Core's HP gauge reached zero, and it terminated.

Cubia itself roared in pain as Cubia Core vanished, and it started to sink slowly into the dark depths. I was fairly certain this was just a prelude to its usual escape act.

"I knew it," I muttered as the monster disappeared like it had been sucked into the color-inverted sky.

Watching the same thing, Kite said to no one in particular, "Cubia doesn't want to let Aura and me come in contact."

"No mistake there," I said. Aura always disappeared when Cubia showed up. At first I'd thought she left because she'd gotten the segment she'd come for. But after Cubia had established a pattern of showing up every time Aura did, the only logical conclusion was that it was trying to keep us from talking to her.

Balmung nodded. "Is Aura somehow Cubia's ally?" he wondered. "Even though she doesn't appear in the *Epitaph of Twilight*?"

"I don't know," Kite said. "But I think right now we need to trust her."

"The Wave has commenced moving again," came a transmission from Lios. "Unable to estimate its direction."

"Wasn't what we just fought the Wave—one of the eight Phases?" I tried asking in return, but the transmission had been cut off at the other end.

"Aren't monsters whose names are in the *Epitaph of Twilight* the Phases?" Balmung said.

I didn't know what to say in response.

They had said that a Phase would appear here. Cubia *was* mentioned in the *Epitaph*, but it was different from the Phases. And Aura was never mentioned in the *Epitaph* at all.

"Hey," Kite said, walking up to Balmung and me as we stood there lost in thought. "What do you think about what Lios said?"

What do you mean? "You mean how he said before Cubia appeared that his men got wiped out?" I asked.

Balmung nodded, and I felt a chill in my bones.

"Anyway, let's get back to town," Kite suggested, and Balmung and I nodded. Standing there speculating would get us nowhere. It would be best to return to our impromptu base at Lia Fail and check on things.

We gated there quickly; but for some reason, I felt uneasy. I was filled with anxiety that something terrible might be going on.

"It's suspended," we heard Lios' voice say with an audible sigh once we'd arrived.

What does he mean?

Wiseman must have noticed our arrival, because he turned and said, "If we herd it into one more route, we'll have another chance!"

Lios sighed deeply at Wiseman's enthusiastic tone.

I looked back and forth between them; then I sent Flash Mail to Kite.

>I wonder what happened?

>>I wonder that myself.

>I don't want to see friction among us when we've come this far . . .

>>Maybe that's not what this means?

We watched Lios' and Wiseman's confrontation. "My men are in the hospital!" Lios was saying. "How exactly are we going to herd it?!"

Huh? If they're in the hospital, then . . . I replayed Lios' words over and over in my mind. His report of "my men are wiped out" weighed heavily on my heart. It made me appreciate like never before the "grace of the bracelet" that Mia had talked about. I could hardly manage the controller with my quivering hands. The scene in the FMD seemed so far away . . . *Fumikazu, what your sister's doing might be a*

.hack // Another Birth

mistake, I thought. I don't want to get anyone involved in this, and even though we're small in number . . .

As we stood there, shocked silent by Lios' words, Helba warped in. "Lios," she said, staring at him, "in an operation, you must consider how to deal with failure."

Once again, I was struck by the danger of the operation. Those of us fighting on the front line were not the only ones in peril of falling unconscious. Everyone involved in this was in the same precarious position as we fighters.

"Helba, that was fast," Wiseman said, turning toward her and nodding in admiration.

She nodded in return.

"So, how did it go?" he said, and she smiled.

How did what go?

"All of them will help us," Helba reported.

All of whom? I knew there were others working behind the scenes, but Lios had made it clear that his subordinates were comatose. I wasn't sure if Helba was aware of that, but I figured it probably had been explained to her. That, in spite of horrible news like that, there were still people willing to help us with the operation . . . that was beyond my comprehension.

My head cocked, and my eyes sought out the direction in which Helba was resolutely staring—at Lia Fail's Chaos Gate, warp rings after warp rings were appearing. My heart pounded hard. The eyes of every participant in our operation focused in that direction—there was no way we couldn't be worried.

All the people who were aware of the danger we faced but who would still help anyway transferred in. Among them were Piros, Natsume, Sanjuro Sunaarashi, and Ryoko Terajima. Unexpectedly, even Gardenia was there. Some of them greeted me with surprise.

Then even more people I had never met ran to Kite's side. Their names were familiar to me from the BBS, and I'd had no idea that they were interested in helping out.

One was Nuke Usagimaru, a Long Arm who had said something about headlining his own comedy show. His hair was pink and waved about in the air like grass, so that your eye couldn't help but be drawn to it.

Next to Nuke stood Rachel, a girl equipped in yellow light who was always posting about her business ideas—like item delivery.

There was a Twin Blade dressed like a ninja, Moonstone by name, standing a short distance apart from the rest of the group.

And there was a Blademaster named Marlo, who was in full body, pitch-black armor, and who gave off a villainous vibe. I imagined he'd picked a fight with Kite sometime in the past.

What's the meaning of this? The arrival of so many player characters who greeted Kite was truly bewildering.

"Yo! So the girl is here, too," Sunaarashi said to me.

"Um, why're you here?" I asked him, overwhelmed.

"I owe our boy Kite here a lot of favors," he said with a smile.

Kite also was the one who had introduced me to Natsume and to Ryoko Terajima . . . Seeing all the player characters clustered around Kite, I marveled that all these people were his friends.

.hack // Another Birth

I grunted. Behind Sunaarashi, yet another set of rings appeared by the Chaos Gate. *Who's next?* When I spotted a familiar Wavemaster, I choked and almost dropped my controller.

"Nyahaaan!" she cried, approaching me with her usual exuberance. "Someone contacted me. So, well, here I aaam!"

When I only stared blankly in response, she said, "BlackRose, are you in power-save mode?" I shook my head wordlessly, and she continued, "Mistral, reporting for duty! Or something!"

Almost too surprised for words, I responded in a hoarse voice, "Why? Why even you, Mistral?"

"Whaddaya mean, 'why'?" Mistral said in her usual energetic voice as she tilted her head. I was happy to see her, but I couldn't help but worry that she was pushing herself too hard. I wondered if she was hiding something behind her outwardly unchanged face.

Helba interrupted everyone's reacquaintance. "The improved edition of the vaccine has been completed. We can relaunch the operation immediately!"

To Lios, her words must have sounded callous. It wasn't like I didn't understand his feelings. Even when I had first learned that Fumikazu was in a coma, I could not bring myself to do anything. For a long time, all I could do was mope around. Lios' subordinates, probably friends of his, had just been struck down, and continuing at this time seemed almost disrespectful.

"I heard about your subordinates," Helba said. "But would ending things at this point benefit them at all?"

There was no response to that. We could not stop. For the sake of getting back everyone who had fallen into comas, we couldn't just stand there.

I stared at Lios. *We've got to move.*

Kite, Balmung, and all the other player characters gathered around looked at him, as well, awaiting his word.

Though he hesitated, Lios opened his mouth and said, "The operation resumes!"

"Roger!" we responded in unison.

"To your positions!" Helba commanded, and the assembled PCs warped out, one after another. "You who remain will form the executive team. Stand by in the lowest level of the dungeon at Ω: Cruel, Vindictive, Scars!"

Helba warped out. The only ones left at the Lia Fail Chaos Gate were Kite, Mistral, Balmung, and me. Turning to Kite, I said, "I'm going, too! You got that?"

Kite nodded and smiled. Mistral looked at Kite and me; then she timidly spoke up. "Eh heh . . . So, here I am! You know, I just can't leave it be. I want to do my part to make the game fun for this little one, too." She laughed, embarrassed.

"Mistral," I murmured in a quivering voice.

"Take me with you," Mistral said, and Balmung looked at her. "You need a Wavemaster, don't you?" she continued, smiling.

Balmung turned back to Kite with a troubled look. "You choose," he said.

hack // Another Birth

Kite, bewildered, looked us all in the eye. When he opened his mouth to speak, Balmung's name disappeared from the party status bar at the bottom of the screen.

"I'll work behind the scenes this time," Balmung said. "You should be all right!" He warped out, vanishing. Those of us who remained looked at one other.

"I'm sorry, but . . ." Mistral said. "If I'm involved in something, then I want to be involved until the end."

"There's no need to apologize," Kite said, "but—"

"It's not like I came back because things feel unfinished," Mistral continued. "I thought . . . I thought it over thoroughly. That's why I came back. It's all right; you don't need to be concerned about me." She looked alternately at Kite and me. "I'm the only one who knows both your situations. That's why it's important to me to be close to you and help out."

Mistral drew in a breath and said, "If I'm not a bother, please add me to the party."

Kite looked straight at her. "Thanks."

I wordlessly gripped the hilt of the massive sword slung at my back, gratitude so overflowing in my heart that it refused to form words.

"Well, it's the usual suspects again," Kite said, and I nodded. Though the emotions involved were complex, Mistral's presence filled me with a sense of relief.

Kite invited us both into the party, and Mistral's name appeared in the status bar.

"Let's go!" I cried.

"Yeah!" Mistral cheered.

The transfer to Ω: Cruel, Vindictive, Scars began, and some of my uneasiness returned. But perhaps we would not face combat after all and would be only on standby. *Who knows?*

For the third time that night we took the shortest route through the field and entered the dungeon. If the Phase called Tarvos was still not there, we would just wait for further instructions.

Once we reached the lowest level, a transmission from Lios came in. "Encircling inducement successful! It's coming!" Whether it was a coincidence or not, the exact moment his words ended, noise filled the room and a purple wave darted about our displays, with momentary color inversions to green.

To think that we'd see this scene twice in one day . . . Unable to pin down my complex feelings, I strained my eyes to see past the wave's interference. *If we defeat this, there's just one more left,* I told myself.

The field we were transported to this time was where we usually fought the Phases instead of where we had just fought Cubia. Crumbling ruins floated in a cloud-wrapped sky, and patterns were drawn with a pale light on the black, inorganic ground. My eyes followed them far off in the distance.

And there, coming straight toward us, was a monster in the shape of a number 6. Three holes opened in its upper tip, and it had a face like a *baniwa* figurine. A huge rusted stake pierced it from the head down—but it didn't appear to be a painful wound, probably because the whole body seemed to be formed of inorganic bricks.





.hack // Another Birth

Mistral hurriedly started to cast strengthening magic on us, but I stopped her with a hand. "Come on, you hammerheaded freak!" I yelled at the Phase as I ran toward it.

It was a bad idea for Mistral to be anywhere near the front line of the battle without some knowledge of what kind of attacks it was going to use. Also, Wavemasters are especially vulnerable while in the middle of casting spells.

Putting myself between Mistral and the monster, I slashed at it. The name it displayed was Tarvos, the same as that of the seventh Phase monster in the *Epitaph of Twilight*.

Tarvos had physical tolerance, so we needed Mistral to help attack magically from where she was standing at a distance.

The words "Malice Light" appeared in the log, and prismatic light suddenly rose up from right in front of Tarvos.

"Wh-what?!" I cried as the light collided in midair, blending into a dazzling white light that swooped down and engulfed us. It took more than half our hit points, so we all turned to recovery for a moment.

And then the words "Cursed Death Play" scrolled through the log, and I found myself lined up behind a target.

What? I thought; but in the time it took the thought to form in my mind, I was floating above the liver-colored water that had gushed forth in the center of the area. Tarvos appeared before my eyes, and I could only hang there helplessly as the stake slowly arose from its embedded position. Moving like it had a mind of its own, the stake flashed with a crimson light and ran me through

completely, dealing nine thousand nine hundred ninety-nine points of damage. My hit points dropped to zero; with no chance to evade or increase my defensive power, I died instantly.

Or rather my character BlackRose did. But Mistral hurriedly used a resurrection item and brought BlackRose back to life.

"Thanks," I told her sincerely as I used an item to recover my own SP.

"It looks like that attack means instant death no matter how much you struggle," Mistral said. "I wonder if we have enough resurrection items!"

Kite and I checked our inventories. "I haven't used any," Kite said, "so we've got some in reserve."

"I don't have that many; but if Kite has plenty, then we might be okay," I said.

"Well, I'd rather not die so often that we run out!" Mistral's tone of voice was so light that Kite smiled at her. Getting wiped out by a combination of the two skills we'd seen Tarvos use would be no laughing matter indeed.

I used an item to recover my full hit points; then I approached Tarvos, reaching a good magical striking distance.

Tarvos raised its voice bitterly in a mournful ululation; brown water flowed down from its haniwa face, pooling below it.

Is it crying? I held off my attacks, putting a bit of distance between the Phase and myself so I could observe. The face it wore made it look like it was suffering.

•hack // Another Birth

Tarvos gave an even louder wail; then it plunged into the pool that its collected tears had made.

"Where is iit?!" Mistral cried from behind us, brandishing her staff over her head. Tarvos emerged from the puddle at her feet.

"Mistral!" Kite yelled, running toward her—but too late, as Tarvos threw a countless number of stakes at her. The damage each one did was small, but there were so many of them that Mistral's hit points zeroed out instantly. Kite was there with a resurrection item to bring her back.

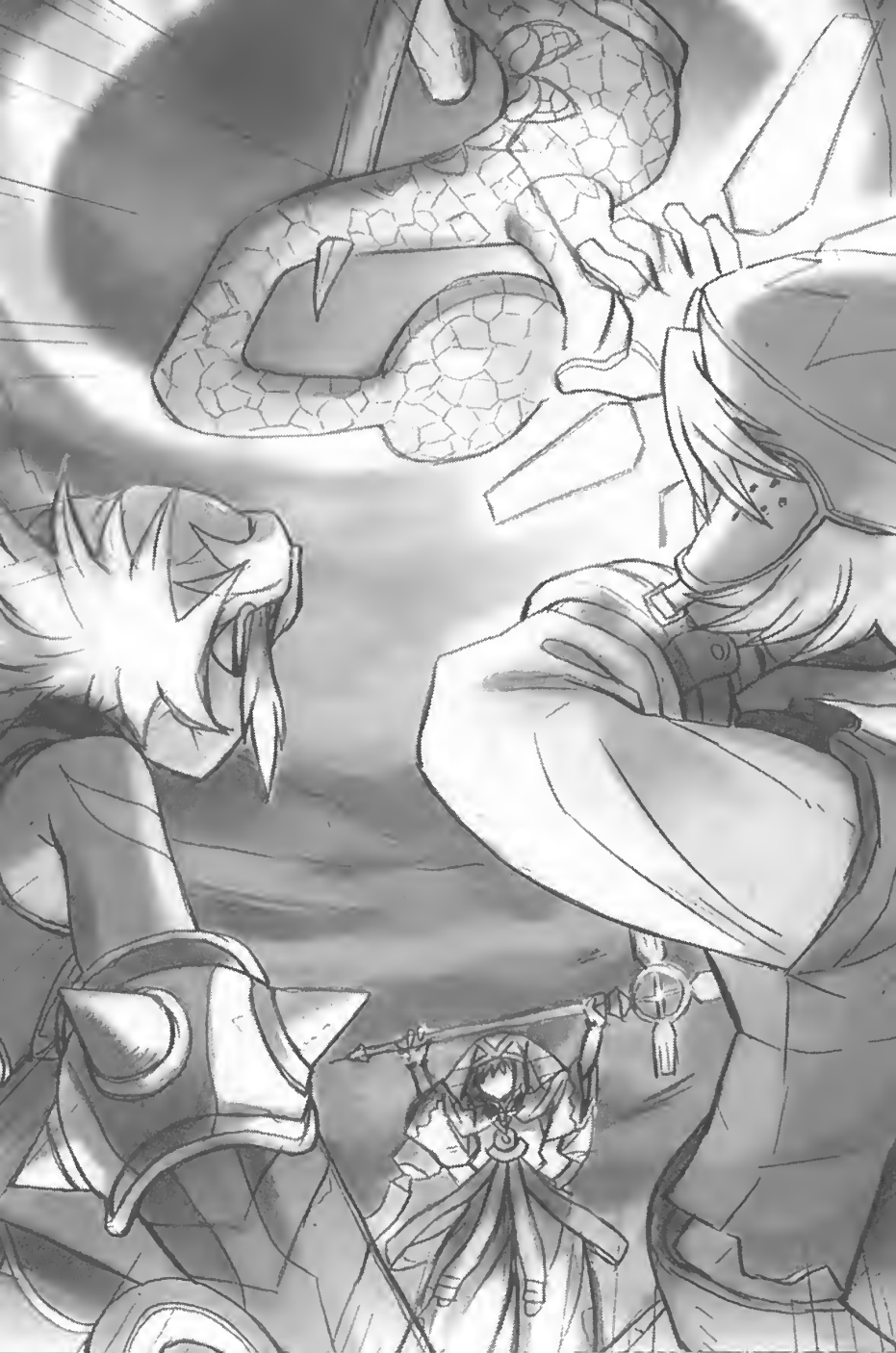
As for Tarvos, its tolerance had changed from physical to magical. It fled from me; but its speed wasn't very fast, so I hammered it with attack skills as I chased it.

Whenever its situation got sticky, Tarvos would shed its tears of brown water, disappearing into the pool formed from them. Each time it did, it switched between physical and magical tolerance. Somehow, we managed to endure its deadly skills, waiting for the words "Protect Break OK" to appear.

"There it iiis!" Mistral cried from behind after hitting Tarvos with an attack spell. Tarvos soared up to swoop down on Kite and me, as we busied ourselves with recovering. We raised our heads to see luminescent green rings encircling Tarvos' body.

"I'm firing!" Kite yelled, aiming from directly below the descending Phase. An arrow of light pierced its face, and Tarvos was Data Drained, turning into a collection of five rocks of various sizes.

"Time to go all out!" Mistral cried, and she started a continual barrage of attack magic from her perimeter position. I used an item



•hack // Another Birth

to recover my skill points before contributing a series of attack skills.

“Tempest Strike!” Kite yelled, firing off a thunder-based skill. When it struck Tarvos, the monster made no sound, but horrendous fissures appears on its surface, widening until Tarvos eventually crumbled to dust.

A strange silence fell. “One more left,” I whispered.

“No, there’s still Cubia,” Kite murmured, turning to me.

“Cubia, the concealed, right?” Mistral said. “But didn’t that just show up earlier?”

I nodded. “We saw Aura, too. But she took off right away.”

“Because of the Cubia thing?”

“Probably,” Kite said.

I looked up at the sky. Usually, after we’d defeated one of the Phases, there would be some kind of transmission from Lios. But not this time. Had he gone to visit his subordinates in the hospital or something? “Let’s go back to town,” I said.

Kite must have been thinking the same thing—he smiled at Mistral and me. “Three fights in one day is rough.”

“You said it!” I agreed. “Let’s hear from Lios what the rest of the operation is and log out.”

“Sounds like a plan!” Mistral chirped.

We stowed our weapons and gated back to Lia Fail.



“What?!” I exclaimed when we got back to Lia Fail. There was no sign of Lios, Helba, or Wiseman. Instead, Net Slum inhabitants were clustered around the Chaos Gate.

The old, longhaired samurai called Jin spoke up. “You are in luck. You are not. You probably are. Good luck. Bad luck. Enjoyment. Here.”

Just when I thought of something to ask him, he warped out.

“I am going now,” said a high-pitched voice. “Please do not look for me.” It was the paper-thin hearth fairy, Sconk.

“Hey, wait a minute!” I cried, but I’m not sure Sconk heard them before he warped out, too.

“Culhwch equals swine running,” said Culhwch, whose face was the (‘>_<’) emoticon used on the net.

“Do you think computers have dreams, too?” said Dorin, whose face was a (°.°) emoticon. “Of course they do. It follows that AI must dream, as well.” Both of them warped out.

“What’s going on?” I said, taking a step forward.

A smile formed on the face of Tartarga, the only Net Slum resident still there.

He walked up to us. “This is best,” he said.

“What is?” Kite asked politely—but then Tartarga warped out, too.

“What the hell was that?!” I groused, looking around. “Nobody’s here. Maybe they all went home after we won?”

“Could be!” Mistral said. “That administrator guy might’ve headed over to the hospital.” That probably did explain where Lios had gone.

.hack // Another Birth

"Oh," Kite said softly, but it wasn't in reaction to Mistral.

"What's up?" I said.

"I got an e-mail," he said. "It might be from Lios or Helba."

Mistral tilted her head. "Maybe we're done for the day?"

It didn't seem like anything was going to happen if we just waited there, so we disbanded and logged out.

Moments after I removed the FMD after our long, tiring session, an e-mail arrived.

"Huh?" Opening the message, I saw that it was from Kite.

The e-mail I just got was from Aura. It's scrambled, but maybe I should forward it to you?

Aura had started to say something before she disappeared, and now she'd sent an e-mail? I hurriedly dashed off a reply.

Send it!

I restlessly awaited his next message.

Beginning of a Long Night

Kite, I wanted you to \$^44 Morsanna, but Secau=e
o> it, Orca . . . O am so5ry. lo no ts?t with
Cubia. &\$bia is lo6rs and the Bracelet's ~<a2'w.
lo defeat =5bia is to 9(is8'0y the Bracelet. Do
not <+*et with Cubia y!/. '

I groaned at the e-mail Kite had forwarded to me. Even though I could read the important names in it, crucial parts were scrambled, and it was very difficult to tell what she was trying to say. The note Kite attached to the e-mail didn't help things any:

The e-mails I sometimes get from Aura are always a little scrambled.

I sighed and rested my elbows on the desk, thinking it over and rubbing my throbbing temples—I'd been staring at the computer for

.hack // Another Birth

so long that I'd developed a mild headache. I checked back through the game logs for the moment when Cubia appeared.

No! You must run! You can't fight Cubia--

I figured that Aura's new e-mail was probably trying to tell Kite the same thing she couldn't finish saying earlier. But even with that assumption, how was I supposed to interpret a scrambled message?

"To defeat Cubia is to 9{s8%0y the Bracelet.' What does *that* mean?" I read the message over and over, murmuring under my breath. Then I started trying out letters in the symbol slots; I realized that, with a few logical guesses, the message became a lot more readable.

"But because of it, Orca . . . I am sorry. Do not fight with Cubia. Cubia is yours and the Bracelet's—" *Yours* probably referred to Kite. So that meant Cubia had some connection to Kite and the bracelet? After all, we had seen someone who looked like Kite squatting inside the Cubia Core.

But . . . it was pointless to tell us not to fight Cubia. If we didn't fight, we'd be killed. Maybe Aura knew some way for us to avoid fighting it entirely? Doubt after doubt bubbled up inside me.

What the heck had Aura wanted done with Morganna? Harald had said that name, too. We'd never met her nor heard much about her. There was an important piece of the puzzle there, but what was it?

I sat back, sudden realization striking. I had misinterpreted something . . . Kite, Asaoka, and Hagiya, too. We had thought

beginning_of_a_long_night

that Emma Wielant was Aura's mother. But, now, while I still felt Harald was her father, something told me that Emma was not her mother. Emma no longer existed, so she could do nothing to fulfill a mother's role.

The living flesh poses a hindrance.

That was what Harald had said in the note he left. I had thought he was referring to life after death—even if it didn't exist. I had thought that was the only situation where living flesh wasn't needed—that was how I was able to think of Aura as Harald's and Emma's child.

But what if Aura's mother actually was not Emma, rather Morganna? Opening the file where I'd stored the *Epitaph* fragments and the notes we had picked up in *The World*, I started comparing it to Aura's e-mail. But, though I strained my eyes staring at the monitor, searching for lines that would satisfy that interpretation, I came up empty beyond what I'd already discussed with the upperclassmen. I groaned, again holding my head—there were just so many things rattling around inside my skull that I didn't understand. Aura was our only lead toward helping the coma victims, that much I knew for sure. She was trying to give some kind of message to Kite, whom she'd entrusted the bracelet to. It was our responsibility to read between the lines.

There isn't any tennis club practice scheduled tomorrow, I thought, so maybe I can find a good time to discuss my theory with Asaoka. Hearing the

.hack // Another Birth

opinion of someone who wasn't directly involved could help me see things from a different angle.

Well, no time like the present . . . I printed out Aura's e-mail and sent a text message to Asaoka.

I had a thought that would flip over what we were saying the other day about the Epitaph of Twilight, and I was wondering if you'd like to hear it.

Looking up at the clock on the wall, I waited for the cell phone in my hand to buzz in reply. Somehow, I wound up falling asleep in that position.



School the next morning was filled with a pre-winter-break hum. Winter coming on only reminded me of Fumikazu, who loved it—though solely because of the hubbub of Christmas and New Year and the prospect of getting presents on either day. This would be the first major school vacation since Fumikazu had fallen into his coma; for me, the best present possible would be having him awake to enjoy it.

I stared gloomily out of my classroom window at where Asaoka's gym class was meeting. She finally had sent me a reply sometime that morning, and it was what she wrote that had spurred my melancholy.



•hack // Another Birth

Sorry I couldn't get back to you right away last night. But to answer, I'd be happy to listen anytime. If it's something about the Epitaph of Twilight, it might be best for Hagiya to be there, too . . . How about we meet in the music storage room after school?

I knew that if I really wanted to hear things from different perspectives, it was best for Hagiya to be there as well as Asaoka. Even so, I honestly didn't want to see him. *Especially* not in the music storage room.

I sighed, and my teacher rebuked me for spacing out. "I'm sorry," I said in a low voice, turning my eyes back to the textbook that I'd opened to a random page. I hadn't been paying attention to the lesson at all.

When that period was over, Shouko peered at me with a worried expression. "You've got some pretty dark circles under your eyes," she said, sitting down in the seat in front of me. "You okay? Don't tell me—too much studying?"

I snorted. "Hardly."

"Did something happen?"

"No, nothing." I tried to smile, but Shouko didn't look like she was buying it.

"Wanna go have fun somewhere after school?" she said.

If only! "I . . . have to do something with an upperclassman from my club," I said. "Sorry."

beginning_of_a_long_night

"Okaaay . . ." Shouko said, raising an eyebrow. "With *that* upperclassman, by any chance?"

That upperclassman. Hagiya's face sprang immediately to mind, and I sighed. "No way."

The moment the words left my mouth, the bell starting fourth period rang, and Shouko smiled. "Later," she said, going back to her seat.

I sat through another class I didn't care about, until at last the final bell rang and I escaped from the classroom, leaving Shouko's and the others' inquisitive stares behind me.

Ever since that day Hagiya had asked me out in the music storage room, my heart would pound whenever I walked near it. Every time I set foot in that dusty, dim, cluttered room, I remembered that day and my chest felt hot. Today was no different, and I had arrived a bit early, so I was alone in the music storage room with those memories for longer than I would have preferred.

Hagiya was the next to arrive. "Oh," I said. "Hi." I could bring myself to greet him, at least, and he smiled. I stared at the doorway behind him. *When's Asaoka going to get here?*

Hagiya, seeing the question in my expression, spoke up. "Asaoka said she'd be late—it's her day for classroom duty."

"Oh," I said, my heart dropping. "Is that so?"

Hagiya was surprised. "She didn't message you about it?"

I checked my phone. "If she sent a message, I never got it."

Hagiya shrugged. "Well, we might as well do something while we're waiting for her."

•hack // Another Birth

"Uhh," I said, "what did you . . . have in mind?" Being one on one like this with him was making me so uncomfortable, I couldn't look him in the eye to await his answer. *I hope she gets here soon.*

Hagiya chuckled. "It sure is warm today," he said, walking over and opening a dust-covered window. "On a day like this, I recommend relaxing on the roof." He leaned out the window and took a deep breath. "Mmm, that's better."

There were two chairs by the window, and he lifted one of them in my direction. "Here, use this," he said, offering it to me. He gestured a couple of times, and I accepted it, brushing off the dust and sitting down. He leaned out the window again.

"So," I said. "The roof?"

"Oh yeah," Hagiya said. "You take a sandwich and some black tea or something . . . oh, fresh donuts from the store can be good, too."

"Sounds like a . . . reasonably priced excursion."

"Doesn't it? So, how about we have a tea party on the roof together sometime?"

I cocked my head and contemplated the childlike pleasure in his voice as he stood there breathing the fresh air.

"Did I say something weird?" he asked.

"No." I shook my head, a smile escaping my lips as I thought how surprisingly charming he was being. The sun shining through the window really made the fair skin of his face stand out, and his hair sparkled. I stared at his profile; his face was full of curiosity about the world around him.

beginning_of_a_long_night

He turned his head from the scenery and met my gaze. "I really do like you, Hayami," he said.

What was I supposed to say to that? He kept peering at my face, and it was a long time before I tried to force out some words. "But I . . ." I knew he just wouldn't get how I felt unless I kept talking, but the words got caught in my throat.

His stare was not unkind, but it was steady. "Uh, look," I finally said—and the storage room door opened.

"Sorry I'm late!" Asaoka said, stepping inside. She looked at us and froze. "Have you . . . already started talking?"

I could feel my face burning as I shook my head repeatedly. She raised an eyebrow curiously, and I blurted out in a torrent, "Not yet. And, umm . . . I know it's jumping right in, but . . ."

"Yeah, no problem," she said, grabbing a chair from the other corner. "Did you make some new discovery?"

I took a deep breath. "Um, do you remember about Aura being an AI?"

"You mean Emma and Harald's daughter?" said Hagiya.

I nodded. "That's the thing. That's what we were thinking, but . . ."

"She's not?" he said.

"I was just wondering . . . what if it's really Morganna who's her mother?"

"Morganna . . ." Hagiya muttered. "Ah, she was mentioned in Harald's note, right?" He pulled a crumpled printout from his bag, and we peered at what it said.

.hack // Another Birth

I must . . . speak with Morganna.

To go where she is,
The living flesh poses a hindrance.
But I must. I must go.
For our Aura.

Emma, please give me a little more
courage.

"Oh," I said, sitting back, and he shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, this?" he said. "I had Asaoka copy it for me. I thought it would be good to have it to look at again if I thought of anything else."

"Ah, well, it's fine by me," I said slowly.

"So then, what made you think that Morganna could be the mother?" he said.

I pointed at the note. "Harald says, 'The living flesh poses a hindrance.' The idea I had was that in order to see Morganna, he threw away his body." Having said that, I took a deep breath.

"So, why would Harald take such a drastic step just to see her?" wondered Asaoka, and she and Hagiya nodded at me to continue.

"Maybe his goal was to talk to the mother of his precious child." I took out the printout of the e-mail Kite had forwarded me from Aura. "Take a look at this."

beginning_of_a_long_night

Asaoka took the paper in hand, and she and Hagiya scrutinized it.

"It's scrambled," said Hagiya.

"Kite said he's gotten several e-mails from her, but they're always scrambled," I said.

"Huh," said Hagiya. "But why? Doesn't make any sense to me."

"What's Cubia?" Asaoka asked.

While I was brooding over how to explain Cubia to her, Hagiya said, "'Cubia, the concealed'—I think that phrase shows up in a line of the *Epitaph of Twilight*."

"Hmm. What about Morganna?"

"Not sure," Hagiya said. "As far as I know, I don't think she's in it."

I pointed out the parts of the e-mail that I could make sense of and explained how I'd arrived at my guesses. They silently considered what I'd said.

"If Morganna was her mother rather than Emma," I murmured, "would that present some sort of problem?"

Asaoka shook her head. "Actually, it wouldn't—I think we were mistaken."

"What do you mean?" Hagiya asked.

I cocked my head.

Asaoka looked back and forth between Hagiya and me. "Maybe Harald wanted to create the ultimate AI," she said, "as a child."

"Huh?"

.hack // Another Birth

"Maybe Harald made the game Fragment, based on the *Epitaph of Twilight* that Emma wrote, as an environment for the child to be born in."

"Oh, I get it!" Hagiya said.

I looked at him. "I don't quite understand," I said.

"Perhaps in order to imprint emotions on the AI, Harald made a 'net game," Asaoka explained.

But I still was confused.

"We talked about how players might be outsiders inserted into the system, right?" Asaoka continued.

"But they're not invaders; players are absolutely essential to Harald's plans!"

"Absolutely essential?" I asked.

"Wouldn't players be an important resource for teaching emotions to the child—to Aura?" Asaoka said.

"The World's purpose is for Aura to be brought up in it," I said.

"That's it." Asaoka nodded. "And it's because you and the others knew Harald's goal that you're trying to help Aura, right?"

I looked at the floor. "Whatever our reasons, we do want to help her," I murmured. *I* was helping Aura in order to save Fumikazu. I had no conclusive evidence that helping Aura would lead to my goal, but it was the only hope I had right now.

"And in this e-mail from Aura, Morganna's name appeared," Asaoka said. "Last time we talked, we didn't have any theories as to who she could be, but now you've got one, Hayami."

"The mother," I said.

beginning_of_a_long_night

“Right, right,” said Asaoka. “So, if, as you say, Morganna is the mother, then . . .”

She was trying to lead me to the answer, but I still didn’t see where she was going.

“What do you think her role is?” she hinted.

“Wait, wait,” I said, confused. “Isn’t that obvious? I just said it.”

“Hagiya, what do you think her role is?” she asked.

“I’d say a mother’s role is to raise her child,” Hagiya said. “In this case, Aura.”

“Ah!” Asaoka said. “But didn’t Harald use the words ‘our Aura’ to Emma?”

“Yes,” Hagiya said. “He phrased it that way in the note.”

“In that case,” Asaoka said, “I don’t think it’s a mistake to say that ‘our’ means Harald’s and Emma’s.”

“So you mean,” Hagiya said, “that Aura has *two* mothers?”

Asaoka nodded. “Like I said before, Harald wanted to create the ultimate AI as a child.”

“Right.”

“So,” said Asaoka, “what if Morganna was created to be the *birth* mother of Harald’s and Emma’s child?”

“Hold on a minute, please.” I sat back to arrange my thoughts.

Aura . . . told Kite she had wanted him to do *something* in regard to Morganna—something that I couldn’t figure out from the e-mail. The fact that it was in past tense bugged me.

Harald . . . probably abandoned his body of living flesh to meet with Morganna.

.hack // Another Birth

"So, you know how I was talking about outsiders before?" Asaoka said after I'd been silent for a while. "Hagiya, remember how you said Harald had based *The World* on the *Epitaph*, and then it included something else beyond that?"

"Yeah. Oh," Hagiya said, his eyes widening. "Maybe that something else is a mother program?"

"Probably," said Asaoka. "And it was the reference to Morganna that we didn't understand. So that makes me think that Hayami's idea about Morganna being the mother is right."

"Let's lay this all out," Hagiya said. "Harald wanted a child with the woman he loved. That's why he tried to create Aura. Up to that point, the explanation fits."

Asaoka nodded. "And so, to make a child, you of course need a mother. But an AI is just a program unless it learns from interacting with others—so maybe he taught the mother the same way?"

"I get it," Hagiya said. "So that's why Harald abandoned his physical body—so he could speak with the program."

"Right," said Asaoka, and she was about to say more, but Hagiya held up a hand.

"Wait," he said. "So what you're leading up to is that Aura wants something *done to* Morganna, her mother program?"

"Well . . ."

I reread Aura's e-mail as Asaoka hesitated. Then I mentally reviewed what we'd discussed the last time we'd met—how *The World* had become unstable because some kind of outside element had been introduced. The only kind of answer we'd arrived at then

beginning_of_a_long_night

was that we'd have to just help Aura without knowing what that outside element was.

"In the end, it's pure conjecture," Asaoka finally said. "But what if we consider it in reverse?"

"Huh?" I said.

"What do you think would happen if the Morganna program, who was created only for the sake of giving birth to Aura, reached her end?"

I considered. "You mean if she fulfilled all her programming, she would . . . turn off?"

"He *was* a genius programmer, you know," Asaoka said. "I think he would have planned that. Morganna is programmed to vanish at the moment Aura finishes growing. Now, if you knew that was how *you* were programmed, what would you do?"

If it were me . . . "I would try to keep her from growing!"

"Exactly," Asaoka said. "I'm sure that's the only way you'd be able to ensure your continued existence."

"Then, you mean that Morganna sent the eight Phases from the *Epitaph of Twilight* after Aura?" I said. "To stave off her own death?"

"I did say this was pure conjecture," Asaoka said, shrugging. "But if that did happen, it would have been a departure from the original plan."

"And that's why Harald panicked," I said.

"Exactly," Asaoka said. "He hadn't thought that the mother he had programmed would refuse to give birth."

.hack // Another Birth

It was beginning to make a strange kind of sense. "But Aura is already there," I said. "She has a visible form; she exists."

"Maybe she doesn't count as born until she's . . . complete," Asaoka suggested.

"Okay, but if that's the case . . ." I murmured, and Hagiya and Asaoka looked at me. *How must Morganna have felt to watch over Aura while knowing that the child's growth would shorten her own life span? How must Aura have felt, knowing that her parent thought of her so bitterly?* "It's kind of sad," I said out loud. *What kind of cruel program did Harald create?*

Silence reigned in the storage room after that pronouncement, until Hagiya spoke up to break it. "But from that point, the thing that gets really hard to understand is Cubia."

We gave him our attention.

"Is it . . . an ally?" he asked.

The question had never crossed my mind. "An ally? Whose?" I asked wildly.

"Aura's," he said. "Maybe she doesn't want you and your friends fighting Cubia because it's her ally?"

"But . . ." I protested. It was really hard to think of Cubia as an ally of Aura's.

As I hesitated, Asaoka answered for me. "Cubia seems to be the aggressor in those battles, so I don't think that idea's correct."

"Then if not Aura's ally, is it Morganna's ally?" Hagiya said.

"Well . . ." Asaoka said, but no more words were forthcoming.

beginning_of_a_long_night

I nervously spoke up, continuing the train of thought. "I get the feeling that's not right either. Cubia always interrupts us when we meet with Aura. If it was Morganna's ally, don't you think it would attack Aura instead of attacking us?" Skeith apparently had attacked Aura, I remembered.

I just couldn't think of Cubia as Morganna's ally any more than I could think of it as Aura's ally.

"True," Hagiya said. "But it definitely seems to be the case that Cubia has some kind of connection with your friend's bracelet."

"It does seem to," I said.

We couldn't think of anything else to say after that; by mutual consent we called it a day and left the music storage room.

The only one Aura can depend on is Kite . . . I pondered to myself as I walked to the exit. I never realized before how truly alone Aura was, without even a mother's love. That was the reason she sent him e-mails even though they were invariably scrambled.

I was about to step out of the building when someone called me from behind.

"Hayami!"

"Yes?" I turned around, and there was Hagiya. He just stood there. "Uh, what is it?" I raised an eyebrow and waited for him to speak.

"Well . . ." he said eventually, "are you free after school lets out?"

"Huh?"

"Do you have plans?"

hack // Another Birth

It was such a sudden line of inquiry that I was taken aback. "Um . . ." I seemed to remember that the last day of school was Christmas Eve. There definitely wasn't any tennis practice that day. . . . My family had a Christmas Eve party every year, but with Fumikazu in the hospital, would we even go through with that this year?

"If you don't have any plans," Hagiya said, "would you like to go somewhere? To cheer you up."

I took a breath. "I still don't quite get you."

He sighed. "Okay, I know. But if you're free that day . . . or if you think you'll have even a little time, call me."

"But I . . ." I looked at his face, trying to think of a good way to phrase a refusal.

"Well, anyway, think about it," he said; then he walked out of the school, without even waiting for my answer. I watched him go . . . and heaved a huge sigh.



There's supposed to be a useful item at Ω:
Raging, Facing Mirrors, Virain. Would you like to
go with me, BlackRose? Being on standby all the
time sucks . . .

After I read that e-mail from Kite, I became BlackRose and headed for Lia Fail. The keywords he mentioned were unfamiliar

beginning_of_a_long_night

to me—I hadn't seen any mention of them on the BBS, which I'd read before logging on, as usual. Had he learned them from some acquaintance—maybe one of the player characters who had come to help out during our most recent operation? The areas he had invited me to in the past—had he sometimes heard their keywords from one of those other friends?

Sometimes, I didn't know where I stood with him. I had come this far considering myself Kite's partner, but what did he think of me as?

Arriving at the Lia Fail Chaos Gate, I took a look around. Kite was there, walking over from the direction of the shops, so I waved. "Hi!" Kite smiled and approached. "Before we go," I said, "there's something I want to talk about."

We formed a party and walked to somewhere off the main thoroughfare so we wouldn't be in anyone else's way. "What about?" Kite asked.

"It's about Aura's e-mail."

"Did you figure out something?" Kite cocked his head and listened intently as I told him about what I had discussed with Asaoka and Hagiya earlier. He nodded, intrigued. "If that's the truth," he said, "I wonder what I should do . . . I can't think of any way to avoid fighting Cubia."

"I'll say," I agreed. "There's no way we can run from a situation like that."

"But if . . ." Kite hesitated, and then he looked up at me. "If we don't fight . . . maybe something might come of it?"

.hack // Another Birth

“Huh?” I blurted out. Kite knew we’d probably end up in comas if we lost a fight, so it was a suggestion I didn’t expect to hear from him. “What’re you saying?”

“Well, I was thinking, if another way opens up . . .”

“How *could* there be one?” I shook my head. “It always shows up itching for a fight. If we just stand there and do nothing, we’ll get taken out in an instant!”

“That’s true,” Kite said, hanging his head.

There was more I wanted to say, but I didn’t want to put things to the test. We weren’t at the point where we could bet everything on one hunch. There were only two opponents left for us to defeat; but once that was over, we still had no proof that would make the coma victims wake up. So I just smiled at Kite and said, “I’m sure we’re doing what’s best. For now, let’s keep doing what we can. If Cubia shows up, we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it, okay?”

“Yeah,” Kite said. “Ah—”

I noticed Kite’s attention had been drawn by something behind me, and I turned around. *What?!*

“I am quite sorry for making you wait,” said Ryoko Terajima, standing there and bowing elegantly. She tilted her head when she saw me. “Oh . . . BlackRose is with us, too,” she said, as she quietly approached Kite.

He seemed to be expecting her. “Yeah, it’ll be easier to get there if we’re all together,” he said.

All together, huh? Of course, it was often true that parties of three made easier work. But I just didn’t get what Kite was thinking,

beginning_of_a_long_night

choosing Ryoko Terajima of all people. *Did he forget what happened the other day?* Terajima had charged at an irregular monster, ignoring us when we'd tried to stop her. If Kite hadn't finished it off immediately, she would have become another coma victim.

Maybe as far as Kite was concerned, even *she* counted as a comrade.

Ryoko Terajima looked at me. Her face was just computer graphics, of course, so I couldn't tell what kind of expression she really was wearing . . . but having her stare at me wasn't helping my mood any. I met her look head on and said something rather out of character for BlackRose. "Hmph. You got some reason to be here, too, Terajima?"

"Is that not acceptable?" she said, like her presence there was only natural.

My lips fell into a pout. "Oh, I *wouldn't* say *thaaat*."

Kite watched our exchange with a troubled face but said nothing.

"Well, whatever," I said. "Let's go, Kite." Without bothering to see whether they followed, I headed for the Chaos Gate. All my encouraging words about Cubia earlier now rang a bit hollow in my ears.

When I got to the gate, I turned around—Kite and Ryoko Terajima had followed. "We're going, then," I said, and as the transfer rings wrapped around the three of us, I watched them as if in a daze.

The moment we transferred to the field, my battle with Ryoko Terajima began. First, over what direction the dungeon was in. It was

.hack // Another Birth

really easy to tell by looking at the map, but for some reason she wanted to go some other way. Kite convinced her we should take the shortest route. Then, when we entered the dungeon, there were two paths—east or west. Kite seemed to hesitate, so I chose east—but Ryoko Terajima started heading in the other direction. We couldn't split up the party, so Kite and I followed after her.

This pattern happened time after time. The umpteenth time I chose a different direction from her, she walked up to me. "Tell me," she said, "exactly why did you come with us to this dungeon in the first place?"

"Because!" I said. "I was invited by Kite, that's why!"

She seemed doubtful. "Oh, is that true?" she asked, turning to Kite, her voice trembling.

"Uh . . ." Kite hesitated.

"Just come out and say it, Kite," I said.

"I invited her. It's reassuring to have BlackRose around," he said. She seemed rather put out by this pronouncement. "But you know," he continued, "you're the one who told me about this, about how there was a rare item—"

"Hold on," I said, "didn't you tell me it was a *useful* item?" I'd assumed he'd invited me so we could find some item that would get us closer to our ultimate goal; was I wrong?

"Umm . . ." Kite looked back and forth between our faces; then his eyes dropped to the floor.

"Oh. I see," I muttered.

"Is that how it was?" Ryoko Terajima asked dejectedly.

beginning_of_a_long_night

"So, was it wrong for me to invite you both?" Kite said sadly.

"Who knows?!" I barked. "I think *you're* gonna have to answer that question for yourself."

"How true," Terajima said. "I agree. In my opinion, BlackRose has it exactly right."

I turned to look at her; it was the first time I could remember us agreeing about anything. She returned my look. "Whatever," I said. "I really don't care about it anymore." But that wasn't really true. I *did* care, but not about any stupid old item; I had no time to waste in a maze of a dungeon like this one.

"Maybe we should just go back," Ryoko Terajima suggested.

I immediately indicated the path to the side. "Well, I'm going to go right."

She immediately said, "And I'm going to the left!"

I knew you wouldn't be able to agree with me for long, I thought, walking down my chosen tunnel and leaving Kite standing there by himself.

Why does Kite have to be so darned indecisive? I thought. *Why did he have to go and make up a story about a useful item if all he wanted to do was hang out with Terajima?*

I kept wandering through the dungeon until eventually I ran into a dead end. Even more frustrated by then, I just used an item to transport myself back to the field. Even though I'd left the dungeon without ever finding out what we had come for in the first place, I suspected that whatever item Ryoko Terajima had talked about wouldn't amount to much.





.hack // Another Birth

Kite wasn't at the Chaos Gate when I reached it. I waited there for a while to see if he would come back, but none of the player characters who came and went were the familiar red Twin Blade.

I don't understand him, I thought sadly as I left The World behind me.



"What am I doing?" I moaned, head down on my desk.

Kite's inability to decide anything irritated me to no end. *What good is a party leader if he can't even choose which way we should go?* If the only reason he'd invited me along was because he felt safer in a party of three, I would've rather he hadn't. If he wanted to hang out with Ryoko Terajima, they certainly didn't need a third wheel.

Why did Kite invite me, anyway?

My cell phone next to the computer started ringing, startling me out of my thoughts. I flipped it open and checked who was calling. It wasn't someone in my contacts list, but I recognized the number—it was Hagiya.

In no mood to answer the phone, I just let it go to voice mail and put the phone back down on the desk. Staring at the now silent phone, I thought, *Aren't we the same?*

Vague and indecisive—they were words that applied to me as well as Kite. *Before criticizing Kite, I should look in the mirror, right?*

It's not that I can't decide, I told myself. *I just don't have any excuse for refusing.* But even I didn't really buy the explanation. I gained nothing

beginning_of_a_long_night

by prolonging things—if I cared at all about the other person, then the best thing to do was say something right away.

That was probably something that both Kite and I could stand to learn. If something had to be said eventually, anyway, worrying over it was a waste of time and brainpower.

With that thought, I knew then what I had to do. “Okay,” I said, taking a deep breath before once again donning the FMD.



“Got a minute?” I asked the winged player character the minute I ran across her. I had searched the town for ten odd minutes since returning to The World.

“Fine, what is it?” Ryoko Terajima answered sharply. “It’s not like I’ve got anything better to do.”

“I have something to tell you, Terajima.”

“And that would be?”

Wordlessly, I passed over my member address. She looked at me suspiciously. “Accept it,” I said. “It’s something we can’t discuss publicly.” I still wasn’t sure how to approach this. But this seemed the right first step for BlackRose’s character to take.

She reluctantly accepted my member address and invited me to a party. We switched to party chat mode.

“We have a misunderstanding,” I told her.

“About what, pray tell?”

“About Kite. What’s between us isn’t what you think.”

•hack // Another Birth

"Then what *is* between you?"

I opened myself to answer, but it wouldn't come out.

"How do you explain how you're *always* with him?" she demanded.

"We're friends," I said simply, flooded with relief at how much easier it was to say than I'd thought it would be. "Or rather, companions, I guess. Valued companions."

She waited for me to continue.

"He didn't mention anything about you coming along," I said, "so I got a little ticked off. That's all. I'm sorry for going on and on earlier."

She shook her head. "No, I was out of line then, too. I also was mad at Kite for being so indecisive."

I laughed. "Oh, you noticed that about him?"

She was surprised. "You were upset about that, as well, BlackRose?"

I shrugged. "There's only so much you can take, y'know?"

She smiled. "Absolutely."

And the ice was broken. We traded Kite stories; then we moved on to other topics. How she had started playing without knowing much about 'net games—that was why she'd used her real name as her character name—how she went to an all-girl high school, and how her father had flipped out when she'd told her parents about meeting Kite online.

Now that I'd made the effort to talk to her, I understood her a lot better. She was just a newbie when she met Kite; that explained everything.

beginning_of_a_long_night

"Oh!" Terajima suddenly blurted out. Then she froze.

A second later, I paused, too.

>>Sorry about, uh . . . earlier.

A Flash Mail from Kite arrived.

>It's not a big deal.

I started typing a reply, but I paused before sending it. Turning to Terajima, I said, "Hey, just now, Kite—"

Terajima stirred. "I received a Flash Mail from Kite just now," she said. "You, too, huh?"

"What?" I asked; then I broke into spontaneous laughter. *Talk about methodical*, I thought. It was just so funny that he'd sent Flash Mail to both of us at the same time, not knowing we were together.

"So, have you replied?" I asked.

"No, not yet."

"Want to try surprising him?"

Terajima looked at me. "Surprise Kite?"

"Yeah," I said. "Doesn't that indecisiveness make you want to get back at him just a little?"

"It sure does," she said, smiling.

>I'm next to the Chaos Gate in Lia Fail. If you've got time, could you come by?

•hack // Another Birth

I sent off a Flash Mail, and Kite's response came back quickly:

>>Sure, be right there.

When Kite arrived, he stopped in his tracks. Watching him standing there—and knowing how surprised he must have been—Terajima and I felt the ill will between us melt away. We grinned at each other.



When the school's closing ceremonies ended, I quickly left the classroom behind me. I had a long list of things to do today. Telling Miho, Risa, and Shouko that I'd message them later, I hurried home.

When I got there, I opened my closet. Compared to the average high school girl, I guess I didn't have much in the way of casual wear; I just wasn't very interested in clothes. After changing into one of the few slender pairs of jeans I had and throwing on a beige woolen coat, I hastily left the house. Gripping the cold handlebars of my bicycle, I pedaled hard.

My destination was the closest train station. There was a small, quiet park within walking distance of it.

The person I'd arranged to meet was already in the park when I got there. "I'm sorry for calling you out here," I said as I walked up.

beginning_of_a_long_night

"Nah, it's no problem," said Hagiya, meeting me with a smile.

The wind was cold enough to make my ears hurt, and my hands were getting numb, but what most surprised me was how calm I was feeling.

Hagiya took a wrapped box from the pocket of his meticulous coat. "Would you accept this?" he asked. "It's a Christmas present from me—no big deal, of course."

I shook my head. "This is . . . impossible for me, really," I said.

"What is?" he said. His tone was calm and composed, but his face had stiffened at my response.

I'm sorry, I murmured internally. This wasn't easy to say. I sighed deeply . . . but quietly, so as not to make it obvious. *Be strong!* I told myself, and I looked straight at his face. "Well . . ."

Hagiya tilted his head, his features still tensed.

"That would cause problems for me," I said, lowering my head. "I apologize for not just coming out and refusing like this until now."

The cold wind cut between us. Hagiya murmured, "I'll be waiting."

My mind already had been made up, no matter how Hagiya reacted. I seemed to have learned from my experience with Terajima just how much confusion could be caused for people around you by your own indecision. "Don't make promises there's no sense in keeping," I said.

Hagiya digested that. Then he said, "Is there someone else you like?"

•hack // Another Birth

"It's not like that. I guess . . . I'm just not interested," I confessed, averting my eyes from him for the first time in this meeting.

" . . . O-okay," he let out. "Boy, I must have been annoying."

I couldn't think of any reply worth giving voice to.

"I was . . ." Hagiya began.

Noticing a change in his tone, I looked up at him questioningly.

" . . . kind of hoping. Today being Christmas Eve . . . and you were so much more agreeable the last time we met, I thought maybe . . ."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Don't be," he said, his eyes downcast. "Apologies just make it hurt more."

As I stood there silently, not knowing what to say, he murmured, "It's cold. Why don't you go on home?"

"But . . ." I protested.

"If I stay here with you any longer, I'll . . . end up hoping again."

"I'm sorry," I said slowly, and I truly, truly was.

He lifted his head; in the dimming light, I saw tears pooled in his eyes, and I had to look away.

"I hope your brother wakes up soon," he whispered.

"Yeah," I croaked.

"You might catch a cold," he said. "Go on."

"I'm sorry," I apologized one last time. "And thank you."

I took off down the street in the last rays from the sun before it dipped below the horizon.



.hack // Another Birth



I got an e-mail from Tartarosa, so I'm heading into The World. If you see this message, could you log on, too?

The e-mail from Kite jumped out at me as soon as I booted up the computer after returning home, feeling refreshed. The message's time indicated it had been sent recently.

Mom had said we should have a party even though Fumikazu wasn't around, seeing as Kouta was looking forward to one. I looked back and forth between the computer and the clock on the wall. It was five o'clock; there was still time for action before dinner.

I'm still all right, I thought, donning the FMD and heading into The World. I had no idea that it would be a very, very long Christmas Eve night. . . .

Disposition •

Kite saw me warp in by the Chaos Gate and he ran over. I waved to him. "Sorry I'm late," I said.

"Nah, I haven't been waiting long," he said as he gave a light sigh.

Did something happen? I peered at Kite's face. "What's up?"

"Well," he said, hesitating.

"Is it something Tartarga's e-mail said?"

"Yeah," Kite said. His voice had an edge to it as he started explaining.

Tartarga apparently had happened to see a wandering AI named Harald. When Harald asked him, "Where is the Sanctuary?" Tartarga responded, "You know better than I do," whereupon the AI muttered a set of keywords, as if remembering, and vanished.

"Sanctuary . . . isn't that Δ: Hidden, Forbidden, Holy Ground?" I said.

•hack // Another Birth

"Apparently not," Kite replied. "Tartarga said the words he heard were Δ: Reincarnated, Purgatorial, Altar."

"Oh, okay." So much for my idea that Harald might have his eye on the area that had the Aura statue. "Well, I'm going, too! I feel like I've got to ask him what he did that made it so people can fall into comas."

"Well . . ." Kite hesitated.

"Something wrong with that?"

"I don't have the virus cores to do it," Kite said.

"It's a protected area?"

Kite nodded at my question and hung his head. "Breaking the protection on that level takes some types of virus cores I've never seen before, so I can't even guess how to get my hands on them."

"Want to try asking Helba?" I'd gotten the impression that Helba had taught Kite about different kinds of virus cores and how to get them, so it seemed a fair bet that she might know how to go about getting these new types, as well.

"But how do I contact her?" Kite wondered.

"Oh." Belatedly, I realized neither Kite nor I had contact info for Helba. Kite apparently had gotten several e-mails from her, but even if he replied directly, his messages just bounced back as undeliverable. "Want to go to Net Slum? We could ask Tartarga directly, or whatever."

Kite shook his head. "I tried going, but no one was there."

"No one at all?!"

"Yeah, none of the usual inhabitants were there."

"Well, gee." I tried to think of someone else we could contact. *What about Lios?* We probably could use the BBS to get in touch with him. But it wasn't like we could post about something like virus cores there. *What to do?* It was a complete stalemate.

The Chaos Gate was teeming with people coming and going, so we moved off to the side.

"Hey, can I ask you something?" I said.

Kite turned around at my words. "Hmm?"

"About yesterday." I wanted to ask about what had happened when Ryoko Terajima had gone with us to Ω: Raging, Facing Mirrors, Virgin. Gazing at Kite, I said, "Why didn't you take the initiative? You were acting out of character. That's why I left the party."

"You're right," Kite said meekly. "Sorry."

"Forget sorry," I said. "I want an explanation."

"Sure," he said eventually.

"Spit it out."

"Well, you and Terajima haven't gotten along since you first met, right?"

That wasn't what I expected. "Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah," Kite said, his voice dropping. "When you're with her, you're different from your usual self."

Thinking back on it, I definitely was. "Maybe," I admitted.

"I wanted you to get along," Kite said. "So I thought that if I didn't take the lead, you two might talk and decide where to go. . . ." He gave a small sigh. "But every time we came to another fork, you

.hack // Another Birth

kept wanting to go in different directions, and I hadn't planned for that possibility. I'm sorry. . . ." He trailed off, hanging his head.

"You know," I said. I was glad Kite had our best interests in mind, but it hadn't ended up feeling that way. Kite looked up at me, and I continued, "It causes problems for us if you aren't firm! You got that?"

"Yeah."

My nagging doubt about him gone, I smiled. "So, what do we do now?" I asked, turning to look at the Chaos Gate. Even if we wanted to go to the area, we couldn't. A sense of helpless impatience washed over me. "Or, anyway, what have you done up until this point?"

"Say what?"

"About virus cores," I said. "You've used plenty of them, right?"

"I'd find virus cores in areas written about on the BBS," he said.

"Ah, I get it," I said. "You got them by Data Draining irregular monsters people mentioned."

"Right."

"And this time, there weren't any posts about anything like that." As usual, I had made a cursory pass of the BBS before logging in, and I hadn't seen anything especially suspicious.

"Maybe I'll go look again," Kite said. "They aren't things you get by running around randomly." Then he froze, catching sight of someone warping in at the Chaos Gate.

"Hmm?" I looked and saw a familiar Wavemaster running toward us. "Mistral!" I cried, raising a hand.

Mistral waved her staff around. "Evenin'!" she chirped, looking at us. "Glad to catch you! I thought you might not be in town anymore."

"How come?" I asked.

"There's a thread on the BBS mentioning some areas, so I thought you might already—"

"There is? Really?" Kite and I interrupted in unison.

"Yep!"

"Do you remember what areas?" I asked, but she shook her head.

"Nope. I mean, I assumed you already knew about it!"

"I'll go look," Kite said. "Wait here, BlackRose."

"Uh, sure," I said, but Kite had logged out before I said the second word. *Ack, I want to go, too!* I gazed at the spot he had vacated; then I turned back to Mistral. "Are you all right playing at a time like this?" I asked.

"Like what?" she said.

"Well, it's Christmas Eve, you know," I said. "I assumed you'd be at a party or something."

"Ah . . . didn't I tell you?" Mistral said. "My husband is a security guard."

That was the first I'd heard about it.

"Guard work is irregular. He couldn't get the day off today."

"Oh, I see," I said.

"Today, he told me he had night duty at Tokyo Mega Float," Mistral said, frowning, "leaving his cute wife all by her lonesome."

hack // Another Birth

I responded vaguely, but she continued talking.

"So, here I am! Not that I thought *you'd* be here."

"Huh?"

"Well, like you said before: Today's Christmas Eve!"

"Well," I said, and then I told Mistral about the e-mail Kite had gotten from Tartarga—and that we might be able to meet with Aura's creator, Harald.

"He's the one who left all those gibberish notes?" she said.

"Right. I want to meet him if we can. We might be able to figure out something."

Mistral nodded while I spoke. "You're going together?" she said.

"We plan to. But I'm not sure yet if we *can* go."

"Then I'm goin', tooo!" she chirped.

"But—" I started to protest; but when Mistral looked at me, I unconsciously closed my mouth. She smiled in response.

"No need to worry!" she said. "I said I wanted to be involved until the end; so, please, let me come along."

"Okay," I said, showing Mistral a smile. She smiled back at me with what I imagined was a satisfied look on her face.

"Sorry for the wait!" Kite said as he appeared beside me. "All right, it's four in all."

"You mean you need four virus cores?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"Hope we can get them," I said.

Kite nodded confidently. "I think we'll be fine."

“Why?”

“The Net Slum inhabitants left clues behind.” He continued, “Their exact words didn’t make any sense, but I think if we go to the four areas, we probably can get virus cores.”

You might be able to reform this world, Spiritas had said to Kite, the bracelet bearer, when he had appeared in Lia Fail.

They’re waiting, too, I thought, *for this situation to be wrapped up*. Even if they were hard to find, the inhabitants of this world were supporting us. They were hoping The World would change.

“Let’s go!” Kite cried, and Mistral and I nodded.

The moment we transferred to the first of the areas Kite had read about, Mistral said, “I guess it’s safe to assume that their telling us about four areas means that we’ll find one of the necessary virus cores in each one?”

“I think so,” Kite said.

Mistral puffed her cheeks, muttering, “They could’ve just all been in one area.”

“I’m just happy they told us about them,” I said, shouldering my massive sword and looking out to the field. “If we had no leads, we wouldn’t know what to do.”

“All right, let’s go!” Kite took the initiative, and Mistral and I followed after him. There was a Data Bug at the lowest level of the dungeon, and we defeated it easily.

Perhaps it was because the battle levels of the areas were so low, but we defeated the other three Data Bugs in short order and safely obtained all the virus cores we needed.

hack // Another Birth

As soon as we returned to Lia Fail, Mistral chirped, "Now we can go there, yay! But maybe we should log off first?" She bounced around Kite and me—we hadn't moved from where we'd gated in.

"Why's that?" I asked.

"Well, it's time for dinner!" Mistral said, grinning. "Or so I was thinkin'."

Oh, yeah, maybe it is about that time, I thought, lifting the FMD partway and peeking at the clock.

"I'm not on any kind of schedule, but how about you two?" Mistral said slyly.

Kite and I looked at each other. *If we go to Harald's right now, I thought, we might still be in time for dinner, but . . .*

Kite spoke up first. "I'll be back soon. Does that work?"

"BlackRose?" Mistral said.

"Yeah, I'll be back, too."

Kite and I logged out, leaving Mistral standing guard.



When I went downstairs, I found Kouta sitting alone in the entryway. "What's the matter?" I asked.

He looked up at me, his eyes full of tears. "Daddy's still not home."

"Oh, he sure is late."

"Akira!" Mom called to me from behind; when I turned around, I saw her getting ready to go out.

Something told me this was not good. But I was unable to give voice to the question in my heart, so I just stood there.

"They said Fumikazu's condition changed," she said.

"What?!" My mind went momentarily blank.

"I'm not sure how it's changed; but, anyway I'm going over there," Mom said.

"What about Kouta?"

"Look after him, Akira."

She rushed out the door, and Kouta and I just stood there, frozen in the entryway. Eventually, I quietly led him into the living room, where we found dinner set out for us, getting cold.

"Want to eat?" I asked. Kouta shook his head, and I sighed lightly.

Even though I didn't know how Fumikazu's condition had changed, I didn't feel up to eating. Perhaps Mom's anxiety had rubbed off on Kouta, as well, as he'd watched her leave in such a rush. He squeezed my hand, hard.

Surprised at his strength, I peered at his face. "It's all right, I'm sure," I consoled him.

"Mm-hmm," he said, but his grip stayed tight.

"If you don't eat something, Fumikazu will get worried," I said.

Kouta looked up slowly, a look of horror dawning. "Don't want that!" he cried.

"Then let's eat," I said, leading him by the hand to the table.

As I warmed some of the creamed stew on the portable burner, Kouta asked, "What about Mommy and Daddy's?"

.hack // Another Birth

I smiled at his concern for others even in a situation like this, and I said, "There's enough, don't worry."

"Okay," he said, but his voice lacked its usual cheerfulness. It was somehow disheartening for just the two of us to be in that big living room.

"Want to come to my room?" I suggested. It seemed somewhat preferable to eating there without the rest of the family. Not waiting for an answer, I opened the rice cooker and started making rice balls.

"We won't get in trouble?" Kouta asked, worried.

"It's fine," I said.

"Hana, too?" Kouta loved the prairie dog who lived in Fumikazu's room. Since her master was gone, Kouta often would go watch her in her cage for hours on end.

"I'll bring her."

"Okay," Kouta said. I ruffled his hair.

I put the warmed stew, several rice balls, and some bread for Hana on a tray, and we took it up to my room, putting it on a low table I retrieved from my closet. I got Hana from Fumikazu's room, and we sat around the table to eat.

As Kouta passed chunks of bread to Hana, who he cradled in his left arm, he seemed to calm down. As he watched Hana hold the bread in two paws and gnaw away at it, his smile looked entirely satisfied.

As for me, I was restless about not having heard anything about Fumikazu's condition. I stared at my computer. *We've got to hurry and resolve this. Before something bad happens.*

"Sleepy," Kouta mumbled. Now that his stomach was full, his eyelids were drooping. Hana stared up at him curiously.

"Time for bed?" I asked.

"In here," he murmured.

"Sure. Come on, now." I laid down Kouta on my bed, Hana still in his arms.

"I'll get up when they get home," he promised.

"I'll wake you up."

"Yeah." He drifted off.

Hana must have resigned herself, too; in Kouta's grasp, she closed her eyes, as well. Taking a long look at their sleeping faces, I shifted my eyes to the desk, where my computer sat.

I've got to go back. Without clearing off my small table, I donned the FMD.



"I'm baaack," I said to Mistral, standing there beside the Chaos Gate. There was no reaction. "Maybe she's AFK . . ."

A reply eventually came, after a short delay. "Welcome baaack!"

"Sorry to make you wait," I said. "Kite's still gone?"

"Looks like it."

"Oh . . ."

"Well, *you're* certainly in a rush," Mistral said, peering at my face. "Did something happen?"

hack // Another Birth

"Why do you ask?"

"You came back really quickly. Have a fight with your family or something?"

I told her about how Fumikazu's condition had changed. My voice trembled as I stood there feeling helpless. Even though we were going to see Harald . . . even though meeting him might lead us to learn something . . .

"Fretting will only make things worse," Mistral said. "It's important to stay calm."

"I know, I know, but still . . ." I shrugged.

"You're right. I'm sorry," Mistral said. "It's really hard to be calm when someone close to you is involved."

We fell into silence. Before long, Kite appeared next to us.

"I ended up running late," he said. "Uh . . . did something happen?" Kite looked back and forth between Mistral and me.

"It's nothing," I said. "Let's go!"

Mistral adopted a complicated expression at my words.

We warped to Mac Anu; then Kite brought up the gate-hacking screen to head for Δ: Reincarnated, Purgatorial, Altar, where Harald was supposed to be. Four crystals in the shape of a cross filled the display. One by one, the four virus cores we had picked up earlier filled in the gaps. The chime of a successful gate hack sounded, and the transfer began.

As soon as we appeared in the area, we ran for the dungeon entrance. Using an item that let us know the locations of all the magical portals, we advanced through the field while avoiding as



.hack // Another Birth

much combat as we possibly could. It seemed that Kite was as anxious to see Harald as I was.

The dungeon entrance was inside a run-down tower that looked as if it would collapse any moment. Our footsteps echoed off the stones; occasionally, noise would split the air and the screen's colors would invert. It made my head throb; so every time it happened, I lifted the FMD and rubbed my eyes.

It wasn't possible to avoid combat in the dungeon, so we advanced prudently. Every single monster that emerged from the magic portals was a Data Bug. All of them were as strong as boss types, and we went through recovery items like water.

When we reached floor B5, Mistral paused and said, "Can we take a little break?"

"You okay?" I asked.

"No worries," Mistral said, grinning. "I just want to recover some SP so we can save on items."

"Makes sense," I said, looking at the path that lay before us. "I wonder how far it keeps going?"

"Usually, we'd be about at the lowest level now, but who knows?" Mistral wondered.

Kite just stared ahead, not saying a word. "Kite?" I said. There was no reaction.

"Kiiite!" Mistral called, but he still didn't respond.

I went up and looked directly at him. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, sorry," he finally said.

"Hey, hey . . . keep it together!" Mistral cried.

Kite nodded vaguely.

"Did something happen?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Uh-uh, nothing's wrong."

"Hold up," Mistral said, walking over. "Don't tell me . . . maybe you've used Data Drain too many times?"

It was true that this dungeon had forced him to use Data Drain consecutively more than ever before. It was, perhaps, only to be expected that using an irregular skill so often might have some effect on his real body.

"You okay?" I asked, worried.

"I just . . . for a second, my PC just didn't want to move right."

"Huh?"

"It's back to normal now," he said, smiling at us. "I'm all right. Let's go!"

Mistral and I looked at each other dubiously. Kite raised an eyebrow; then he moved on ahead. We followed him once more.

This dungeon was much deeper than ordinary dungeons. It felt like it would go on forever, and it gave me the chills. Finally, we somehow got to floor B10 and found a room with purple mist hanging in its doorway.

"The bottom floor at last!" Mistral cheered. "We finally made it!"

"That took forever!" I grouched. "I was going to freak out if we didn't find him here after coming this far!"

"If we're just going to see Harald, we should be fine without strengthening spells, right?" Mistral grinned.

.hack // Another Birth

"True," Kite said, and he stepped forward through the mist.

"Let's go!" Mistral urged me, and I followed Kite.

In the center of the room, beyond the mist, stood an armchair with a giant stone monument floating above it. Encircling it, several reversed picture frames floated, as well. Each frame had a portrait in it; but, creepily, none of them had faces. As if they had been gouged out, only whiteness was visible where their faces should have been.

Not a soul could be seen. No one was there. "He's not here!" I cried, looking around the room. Around the armchair was a stark whiteness, and there didn't seem to be anywhere someone could hide.

"Who goes there?" a strangely slow voice drawled. "Who are you?"

Surprised, we all looked up at the stone monument. The voice definitely had come from it.

"Is this Harald?" Kite murmured.

"My name . . . is Harald." The voice escaped the stone itself.

You can have a conversation with this thing? The previous times we'd met Harald, it had seemed like it was only a recording. But if we could ask him what his intentions were, it gave me hope that we might be able to take things a step further.

But that fleeting hope vanished as soon as it came. Harald's inflectionless voice just irked me too much. *Because of you, we're going through all this agony!* "What?" I cried. "You're nothing but a piece of rock! You're responsible for the Cursed Wave, *aren't* you? All right then, *you* fix this thing!"

"No. The passage of time is irreversible. Birth or death. Now only these two choices remain."

"What? What're you saying?" After stepping forward unthinkingly, I faltered. Kite's bracelet suddenly lit up. I looked back and forth between the blinking bracelet and the talking stone.

Then it happened. In midair before the monument, as if attracted by the bracelet, Aura appeared.

"Aura!" Kite cried, taking a step forward.

"Aura . . . the child of light," the stone said. "Emma's daughter. My daughter. Just a little more." It fell silent.

I walked up to the stone, gently extending my hand to touch it. It was inorganic, just the stone it appeared to be. I even tried hitting it, but there was no reaction. "It's no use," I said, shrugging my shoulders. "This guy is totally gone." I looked up at Aura.

"Aura, I have something I want to ask you," Kite said. "You told me I shouldn't fight Cubia. Why?"

Aura answered Kite's question without changing her expression. "Cubia is the shadow. When there is light burning in the darkness, a shadow is born. When the bracelet appeared in this world, Cubia was born, as well. The bracelet and Cubia are opposite sides of the same coin. Therefore, if you defeat Cubia, you'll destroy the bracelet."

I couldn't have been more shocked. *Say what?!*

Kite was as speechless, as well, and he looked at the bracelet shining on his arm.

I felt a bad premonition, and looked warily at our surroundings. We had predicted earlier that Cubia would keep showing up with the single-minded goal of keeping us from meeting with Aura. It had to be aware that Kite and Aura were meeting at this very moment. *But . . .*

.hack // Another Birth

I gripped the controller tightly. *If it shows up, we can't destroy it.* If the bracelet ceased to be, we would no longer be able to defeat the last of the eight Phases—Corbenik.

As we stood there, dumbstruck, Aura murmured above our heads, "Cubia will no longer run away. Because . . . because I have finally been released."

Released? "What do you mean?" But my voice was suddenly cut off by a transmission from Lios.

"Massive data believed to be the Wave is heading in your direction!" Lios' voice said. "That's the last one! Destroy it!"

All right! I thought. *If we beat Corbenik before Cubia appears and we have to fight it, then there's no problem if the bracelet disappears!*

I readied my massive sword, and Mistral also readied her staff. For now, I would do everything I could. Once it was all over, I'd know whether I'd done the right thing.

"Traveler, take this to heart," the previously silent stone murmured. "It is darkest before the dawn."

Before the dawn? I didn't understand what Harald meant. Was he trying to say that the dawn was near? By *darkness*, did he mean something that would extinguish the light that had led us thus far?

A noise shattered the still air, interrupting my thoughts. The view through the FMD warped and twisted.

"Run away!" Aura shouted. "It is not too late!"

Run? Why?

"We'll defeat it and end this!" Kite shouted, readying his twin blades and scowling at the quivering air above us.

"No!" Aura shouted. "That's not it! It's not—" Before she could finish, she vanished as if swallowed up by the stark white backdrop.

My hands trembled as they held the controller. *Please don't let Cubia appear*, I implored, staring at the warping sky. But it was not to be.

A familiar roar resounded in our ears. It was so loud, my hands flinched to strip off the FMD.

"Ah!" Mistral cried, and I looked back at the display to see the stone monument crumbling to pieces as the roar continued.

Oh no. "Kite!" I called to the figure standing next to me. *Harald's . . .*

But Kite had his eyes fixed on the fluctuation in the sky. He slowly muttered, "Cubia . . ."

In that instant, the screen went completely white. I could see nothing at all. I didn't even know if the companions I depended on so much were still at my side.

I was scared.

But, gradually, the display regained a tinge of color. *Where am I?* When I looked around, I found myself in the same room as before, but the armchair and pictures had vanished. Only the floor at our feet remained; everything else was gone. "Kite?" I asked. "Mistral?"

"We're all good!" a voice chirped behind me, and I turned around, relieved to see they were okay. But then I noticed Kite wasn't moving. His eyes just stared straight ahead.

"What's—?" I started to say; then I clamped my mouth shut. The floor . . . was collapsing! Chunks fell away into nothingness,

•hack // Another Birth

and the pieces of solid ground we were standing on grew smaller and smaller at an accelerating speed.

We're gonna fall! I couldn't bear to watch, so I closed my eyes. Still tightly gripping her sword, my BlackRose character fell along with the collapsing floor.

There was no sound. I heard no voices, neither Kite's nor Mistral's. *I'm scared . . .*

Through my closed eyelids, I had a distinct vision of the hospital room where Fumikazu was sleeping. *Even Fumikazu is fighting, there in the hospital,* I told myself. *I can't afford to lose here.* Steeling my nerves, I opened my eyes.

Pitch-blackness surrounded me. I was falling, but my descent felt slow. Directly below me, I could see Cubia's organic form sprawling in wait.

Looking around, I saw Kite right next to me, falling as I was. I nodded firmly toward him. *It's all right.*

We landed gently on one of Cubia's roots, and Mistral alighted behind us. "Form up!" Mistral said, chanting one strengthening spell after another.

Where we had landed was quite a distance away from Cubia's face. I glared at it intensely.

"It's huuuge!" Mistral cried, amazed. "Let's defeat it," she finished casting her spells and thumped Kite and me on the shoulders, "and make it back to town together!"

"Yeah!" Kite and I cried, readying our weapons and taking off running toward Cubia's face.

There was a magical portal drawn on the surface not far beyond where we landed. As we approached, Cubia Core appeared from it. Just like before, it was accompanied by four types of Gomoras.

“Here we go!” I shouted.

Inside Cubia Core, sure enough, an avatar similar to Kite was visible. *Does that have something to do with the “opposite sides of a coin” thing?* I wondered, taking a good, hard look at it.

“BlackRose?” Kite peered worriedly at me.

“Let’s just get this over with!” I yelled. Cubia Core had physical tolerance, so I left dealing with it up to our Wavemaster Mistral and Kite with his scrolls, while I personally went after the Repth Gomora that was responsible for healing. “I’ll handle my own recovery, so don’t worry even if it looks like my HP is almost gone!”

“All righty then!” Mistral chirped.

Before long Cubia Core switched to magical tolerance; without missing a beat, we automatically switched roles—I attacked Cubia Core, Kite attacked the Repth Gomora, and Mistral started dealing with the other Gomoras from a distance. Following the same pattern whenever it switched tolerances and using items freely, we dealt with the Gomoras in short order, and we quickly took out Cubia Core itself.

“Wasn’t that quicker than usual?” I wondered. Even though we had defeated Cubia Core, Cubia itself showed no sign of running. It was making us uneasy.

“Maybe it’s ‘cause we leveled up!” Mistral said, cocking her head.

.hack // Another Birth

"It's not running," Kite said worriedly.

If you defeat Cubia, the bracelet will be destroyed. Aura's words to us in the white room, and the warning from her encoded e-mail, flashed through my mind.

"We don't have any choice," Kite said. He gripped his twin blades and headed forward.

"Wait!" I cried, spying another magic portal in the direction he was heading. When Kite got close to it, another Cubia Core emerged.

Just like before, we divided up our duties, defeating the Gomoras and whittling down Cubia Core's hit points. When they dropped to a very low level, Cubia itself fired off an attack skill from afar—Jihad, which sent lightning bolts screaming down at us from the sky. When they hit us, we had to use items to completely recover our hit points.

"Here it comes again!" I shouted as Cubia fired off a Jihad once more. It was like it was providing cover fire for the Core. "Whoa! At this rate, it won't matter *how* many recovery items we have!"

"Then it might still be a good idea to use status abnormality skiiiills!" Mistral cried as she used an item that recovered hit points and skill points at the same time.

Although we somehow managed to defeat the second Cubia Core, it was iffy whether we could win our next battle. I had only ten recovery items left. "I sure hope there aren't any more magical portals," I said fervently.

"I still have recovery items left," Kite said, "so I'll split them between you." Kite gifted HP and SP items to Mistral and me.

I accepted them; then I asked worriedly, "You mean you've still got enough?"

"I'm fine," Kite said.

"If you die, all of this will be for nothing!"

"I know."

We fully restored our hit points and skill points; then we headed toward Cubia itself. Thankfully, there were no more magical portals. My relief at the lack of combat lasted only a minute, though; Cubia itself attacked us.

"I guess it's *not* running away," I groused, readying my large sword, glaring at Cubia as we ran up to it.

"Fine then, let's settle this," Kite muttered.

"Once and for all," I said. "I'll stick with you to the end." I slashed with all my might at the center of Cubia's chest; its heart was protected by roots.

It had neither physical tolerance nor magical tolerance. Even though it had more hit points than Cubia Core had, the battle was easier than our previous one as I laid into Cubia with attack skills until my skill points were exhausted. We were able to take its hit points down easier than Cubia Core's—but the lower they got, the more frequently it fired off attack skills in return. The recovery items Kite gave me ran out, along with the few I'd had left.

"Sorry, but I could really use some recovery magic now if my HP goes into the red," I called to Mistral behind me; then I returned to the front line. "Rai Smash!" I shouted, mustering my skill points

•hack // Another Birth

for one last attack skill. I somersaulted, culminating in a powerful finishing slice at Cubia. Its remaining hit points vanished.

"You did iiii!" Mistral cheered, running up. But I had a feeling things weren't over, so I kept my sword up and stood at the ready.

"Is it really over?" I murmured.

Kite nodded. "The bracelet is safe." Relieved, he rubbed his right arm where the bracelet was.

Then, suddenly, the image in our displays shook violently. "Wh-what?!" I shouted.

The text "Sephira Returner" appeared in the log—it must have been a skill that Cubia used. *How?* Despite the fact that its hit points had reached zero, Cubia was able to use the skill.

The walls around Cubia crumbled, and the earth trembled. The FMD shook so much that it seemed it would break.

"Look at that!" Mistral cried, pointing to Cubia's corpse. I targeted it—and saw that its hit point meter was recovering in leaps and bounds.

"Huh?!" I shouted. Before long, Cubia was fully restored, with even more hit points than it had started out with during the battle we just barely had made it through. "What's going on?"

"Maybe that was a skill it can use to recover even if it's defeated," Mistral said mournfully.

"Yeah, but . . . my items!" I said. They were gone completely, and so were Mistral's and Kite's. We no longer could recover hit points or skill points. My voice shaking, I said, "Do you think we've got any chance?"



.hack // Another Birth

Kite looked up at Cubia—and he suddenly shouted. “BlackRose! Strike my bracelet!” He turned the shining bracelet toward me.

“You want me to do what?!” I cried in shock. “Hey, what the hell’re you saying?!” I had heard him perfectly clearly, but that wasn’t something I could do, could I?

There had to be some way to defeat Cubia, but wracking my brain produced no suggestions. We couldn’t afford to lose the bracelet now, with one Phase left to fight, but I could think of no other way Cubia could be beaten.

“If they’re two sides of the same coin, then this could settle it!” Kite said.

“But the bracelet!” I shouted. “It’s—”

“Forget about the bracelet!” Kite cried. “We’re in danger!”

That’s true, but . . . As I stood there, unresponsive, Kite raised one of his twin blades over his head and aimed it at the shining bracelet.

“If *you* can’t do it . . .” he threatened.

I stopped Kite, half out of despair. “Oh, all right! Fine, I’ll do it! I’ll do it, so shut up!”

He smiled at me, but I knew it was forced.

Even Kite’s scared . . . I slowly raised my sword.

“Be sure of it,” Kite said, holding the bracelet up before him.

I squeezed the hilt of my sword tightly; then I called out, “Here I come!”

I visually homed in on my target of Kite’s bracelet. *Is this really a good idea?* I wondered, having second thoughts. *There might still be a way*

to win without destroying the bracelet. We might be jumping the gun. And even if we do destroy the bracelet, Cubia might not be defeated.

Without the bracelet, how could we get any closer to our goal? Shifting my view from my target, I looked again at Kite's face. He had been watching me the entire time.

You're sure?

As if hearing my thought, Kite nodded.

We had gotten only so far by doing what we could do according to the circumstances. We had done everything with the belief that we were right. Some things had troubled us along the way, but our path had led us here, regardless.

I closed my eyes. *I have faith in you!* Taking a deep breath, I opened my eyes again. I brandished my massive sword and took off toward Kite in a sprint.

"Haaah!" I shouted. Leaping up and aiming at the bracelet that Kite raised high, I swung my sword downward as hard as I could.





Twilight●

There was the sound of something shattering—so loudly that I could feel it in my bones. I was blown back, sword and all. Somehow I reoriented my stance in midair and landed in a ready position. We were still right in front of Cubia, which could attack at any moment.

“Did that do it?” My voice resounded throughout the irregular area.

The bracelet and Cubia are opposite sides of the same coin, Aura had said. I hadn’t understood then; but after confronting Cubia and fighting it so many times, Kite had. *If you break the bracelet, Cubia will be done for*. And so Kite had entrusted the destruction of the bracelet to me. He was the first companion I had met in The World, and I had come to trust him and sought to support him, so I granted his request.

“Graaah!” Kite cried out, pain lacing his voice. He wildly waved his right arm—his bracelet arm. Mistral ran over to him. I, too, wanted to run to his side . . . and even though I knew I had to go to him, I was unable to move.

•hack // Another Birth

“What about Cubia?” I murmured, staring at the silent, quivering hulk. Usually, it would bellow and escape into the sky, but this time it did no such thing. It was still alive, but it seemed to be suffering in concert with Kite.

A dark premonition sprang to my mind. *What’s going to happen to Kite’s right arm? Forget that—what’s going to happen to him in the real world?* In this game, the enemies we were fighting had affected even the real world. I doubted Kite would get off scot-free after using an irregular item like the bracelet.

I still found myself unable to run to his side. The FMD felt frightfully heavy on my face. My heart pounded in my ears, a most unpleasant sound. *We might have just done something we can’t take back.*

“BlackRose! Come here!”

I flinched at Mistral’s voice.

“Akira!” she shouted. “Quickly!” At the mention of my real name, I took an awkward step—but, once again, I could go no farther. Seeing I wasn’t about to move, Mistral ran over to me. “What’s wrong?”

“N-nothing,” I said, but my tone was nowhere near its normally cheerful state.

Mistral gazed at me wordlessly—like she had before, when I’d burst out angrily about being bullied—she patted my head as if to encourage me. “It’s all right. It’s not like Kite or you took the decision to break it lightly, is it?”

Her understanding filled me with relief. “Thanks.”

She looked at me and smiled; then she turned and ran back toward where Kite was writhing in agony. I followed after her and timidly called to Kite, "Hey, are you okay?"

Visibly in pain, he held out his right hand to stop us from approaching. Then he shouted. At that moment, the bracelet started to transform, emitting an odd sound. It blossomed the way it did when Data Drain got used and, as if the power to Data Drain were still there, sparks scattered and the bracelet began to flash. The rim, which had opened in the form of petals, slowly began to revolve.

Mistral drew back. "What's going on?" she asked in a shaky voice, and I shook my head. I never had seen the bracelet transform into such an ominous shape.

Kite screamed even louder, and the bracelet began crumbling and falling away, like data scattering. At the same time, progressions of symbols ran throughout Cubia's body. It shouted along with Kite as it started dissolving upward from its roots. At an accelerating rate, the bracelet and Cubia were both transforming into strings of symbols and unraveling, vanishing into thin air.

Cubia's entire body was covered with sparks, and there was a violent tremor in the ground beneath it. The brightness increased until we were engulfed in a stark white light, and I closed my eyes to shield them.

When I slowly opened them again, I stood in an eerily familiar dark landscape, its sky was concealed by thick clouds. Unlike what I had seen in my dreams, however, there was no red moon; instead,

hack // Another Birth

a dark red sky appeared and disappeared through openings in the clouds. In that gloomy wasteland, Kite, Mistral, and I stood, overcome with amazement.

"We've lost our trump card," I murmured.

Kite turned slowly toward me and said, "But the enemy's lost Cubia. And we have Aura. I'm sure there's another way to defeat the Wave."

"You're *sure*?" I said—but, as if to interrupt me, Helba suddenly warped in, right in front of us.

"We're assembling the operation participants," she said. "We'll continue our discussion in the Ω server root town. See you there."

I stared at her, and she shifted her gaze in my direction. I was so scared that she was mad at me, my heart was pounding.

>>It's nothing to worry about. You should be proud.

After Helba sent me the Flash Mail, she gated out and disappeared.

"Shall we go back?" Kite said slowly.

"Let's," I said, feigning calm. "Looks like everyone's waiting."



"Ha! Somehow, we made it back," I said, my voice deliberately cheerful, once we got back in town and still no one spoke up.

There was no one around the Chaos Gate in Lia Fail. No operation participants nor other player characters.

"Where is everyone?" Mistral wondered. "Oh, maybe over there."

When I followed her line of sight, I saw everyone involved in the operation approaching. Everyone except Elk.

Wiseman noted our presence; then he surveyed the scene. "Well then, let us begin."

Easy for you to say. I grimaced. The bracelet, pivotal to our operation, was gone.

Standing next to me, Kite relayed the truth of our situation. "In the fight with Cubia just now, the bracelet was lost."

"Impossible!" Lios erupted in a loud, angry voice. "The bracelet is our only means of opposing the Wave!"

Even though what he said was obvious, I flinched.

What do we do? As everyone talked noisily, I averted my eyes.

"'All powers become a drop, and the world is in twilight.' Just like the *Epitaph*," Wiseman muttered. It was a stanza of the *Epitaph* that I hadn't heard before.

Perhaps the word *twilight*—when things were nearing their end—meant that The World was going to be destroyed. Even though we had tried so hard up to this point, maybe it was all in vain. Some RPGs did have bad endings—but this was an unconventional game that even affected real-life players.

I can't let this end horribly, I thought.

Kite spoke up. "About that . . . is it really correct to call it *twilight*?"

.hack // Another Birth

Everyone fell silent at Kite's words.

"Interesting. Continue," Helba urged him on.

"Take Aura," Kite said. "When I look at her, it doesn't seem like this world is heading toward the end of its day. Instead, maybe it's twilight as in the light of *dawn* . . . at least, that's the feeling I get."

"Certainly, *twilight* does carry both meanings," Helba said.

"Even so, how does that affect anything?" Lios asked.

Kite said, thoughtfully, "If Harald designed this game based on his understanding of the *Epitaph*, would he have prepared a world with a final outcome of being destroyed by the Wave?"

Balmung, apparently persuaded, said, "Aha! And therein lies our chance for victory."

Kite nodded. "Harald said, 'It is darkest before the dawn.' I want to believe him."

Oh. I get it. "So, what do you want to do?" I asked.

Kite looked in my direction. "All right," he said. "We need to herd it to a specific area just like we've been doing. And after that, we'll hit the Wave with an all-out attack."

There was no doubt that we were currently in the period right before dawn. The bracelet was lost, so no light of hope was visible as far as any of us could see. If this was the darkest it could get, all it could do from here on was grow brighter.

Lios hesitated. "That's . . . a gamble," he said.

"But it does have merit," Helba said, as if chiding him. I nodded at her words.

"It's true that it's dangerous, though," Kite said, reminding us not to be hasty.

But if we don't undo this situation, Fumikazu won't come back, I thought, gripping the controller tightly.

Arms crossed, Lios stood there pondering. We watched as he scrutinized Kite's and Helba's words. "Very well," he said at last. "But this is not a compulsion or an order. Anyone who doesn't want to participate, gate out before I count down from three." He slowly began the countdown. "Three . . . two . . . one." Not a single person moved.

Helba smiled at everyone there. "That decides it," she said.

"I have one suggestion," Balmung said as he stepped forward. "Why don't we first test that method on a Data Bug?"

It made sense. If we couldn't win against a Data Bug, we probably couldn't go toe to toe against a Phase.

"Unfortunately, we don't have that kind of time," Helba said, looking at the sky. "It seems that this time we're the ones who've been cornered."

Cornered?

"Data increase—here comes the Wave!" Before the words finished leaving her mouth, a violent tremor shook Lia Fail.

"Take me with you!" Balmung shouted, not quite drowned out by a crackling noise.

Kite looked at Mistral and me. I nodded, indicating my intent. *I'll stick with you until the end.*

Mistral froze for a second. Her name vanished from the status bar. "I'll support you from behind!" she cheered.

.hack // Another Birth

Balmung shouted to her, "If you think you're in even a little danger, take off your FMD and force a shutdown. All right?"

Mistral nodded reluctantly.

"Sorry for being selfish there," Balmung said over the party channel. "She can make decisions for her own self, but she's pregnant—she's not the only one in danger."

"That's true," I said.

Visual noise ran across the display. I narrowed my eyes against the flickering and readied my massive sword.

"It's coming!" Kite shouted, and the display went pitch black. A thunderous tremor shook the ground and the air was rent with a terrible noise—and then a bubble of still, silent air expanded around us. Then slowly, from far, far away, we heard the quiet roar of a wave. Closer and closer it grew, louder and louder it roared. The last of the eight Phases, Corbenik.

It came in the form of a light purple wave, raging all over the display. I desperately strained my eyes to keep from being swallowed up by it.

The final battle was in a place different from usual. Many thin clouds hung in the sky, and a strong wind blew those clouds about at incredible speeds. Large rocks and partially collapsed buildings floated against the lead-gray backdrop. At our feet, hexes ran along the ground in fissurelike formations. From some of them, the entire spectrum of colors of light shone out. It was a creepy place and, perhaps because of those lights, it seemed somewhat unreal.



Balmung looked upward. "So, this is the last one," he said. Descending from the sky was a large shape something between a cocoon and a gourd, a form obviously different from every Phase we had fought up until now, except for Macha. It was Corbenik.

"Let's do this!" I yelled, raising my sword and making to slash at the cocoon.

"Wait!" Balmung shouted before I could make my move.

I turned to face him.

"Take these," he said, and he gave hit point and skill point recovery items to Kite and me.

"Thanks," Kite said.

"I thought you'd probably be out of them," Balmung said.

"We were broke all right," I acknowledged with a laugh. "What a relief!"

We accepted the items quickly. Then we stared at Corbenik descending. "This will be the end," Kite murmured.

"Give it everything you've got," I said. "Let's put an end to this!" Corbenik was within reach, and I gave it a powerful slash with my sword. Perhaps it had low defensive power; its hit points decreased unexpectedly. It also had attack power far inferior to the Phases that had come before it.

This is weird, I thought. Kite and Balmung also stared at it suspiciously. Our enemy was seeming to go down entirely too easily.

And then, without warning, Corbenik changed its form. The cocoon twisted eerily, wriggling as if something was inside it. We backed off to attack from a distance and watched it.

Corbenik's apex split, and red hexlike things flew out as if from an eruption. They fell around us as we circled Corbenik, but we couldn't target them, which had to mean they weren't monsters. Keeping an eye on the mysterious things, we renewed our attack on Corbenik.

Balmung was the first to notice something strange. "Hey!" he shouted. Where he was looking, a 5 had appeared beside the hexes that had come out of Corbenik. We looked at it, worried, and it changed to a 4. The numbers counted down: 3 . . . 2 . . . 1 . . . 0—and at that moment, the hexes exploded. We were all near at least one hex, and about half our hit points vanished.

"Ola Repth!" Balmung instantly chanted, casting a recovery spell on his companions within range—both Kite and me.

"Thanks," I said.

"We'd better be careful of that attack," said Kite, looking at Corbenik.

"Just a little more!" I said, again slashing away. Corbenik's hit points dropped away easily, and it was defeated. "What?" I inadvertently said aloud, somehow disappointed. Slinging my sword on my back again, I stared at Corbenik as it seemed about to vanish.

"Don't let your guard down!" Balmung said harshly.

"But it's over," I said, turning to face Balmung behind me. Then I saw Kite's eyes open wide, and I hurriedly turned back around to face Corbenik. "H-how . . . ?"

Corbenik's color was weak, but a bud had formed at its tip. The bud grew rapidly, quickly forming into two large leaves. The

.hack // Another Birth

leaves rolled around to engulf the cocoon, overlapped, and merged into one larger leaf that appeared before us. When I targeted it, its name appeared—Corbenik.

Shocked, I hurriedly unslung my sword and stood at the ready. “We’ll beat you however many times it takes!” I yelled, unleashing an attack skill on the leaf Corbenik. But now, unlike what had happened with its previous form, the leaf’s hit points hardly diminished at all.

The words “Cruel Exploitation” appeared in the log—and at that moment, a root darted from the bottom of the leaf and delved into the ground.

Where is it?! Knowing it was going to shoot out of the ground somewhere else, I cast my eyes about wildly . . . and the root’s tip sprang from the ground at my feet, wrapping around my leg. I was held fast.

“Eh?!” I shouted, and the root pulsed—absorbing some of my hit points. Kite ran over and used a recovery item on me, but it didn’t seem to be able to keep up with the rate my hit points were drained away by the root, as my meter quickly dropped to zero.

“Hey!” Balmung shouted, and Corbenik fled, taking its root with it. Balmung used a resurrect item and brought me back to life. As we used items and magic to recover my hit points and skill points, Corbenik put some distance between us.

“Thanks,” I breathed.

“That sure was nasty,” Balmung muttered, staring at where Corbenik had retreated.

“Yeah,” I said. “Looks like recovery won’t stop that attack.”

"It's regaining hit points, too," Balmung said. "We've got to do something before it really starts putting pressure on us."

"I'll say," I agreed.

"Let's go!" Kite declared, and we ran after Corbenik.

The fight resumed, and its normal non-root attack nearly wiped us out several times; we dealt with that via self-recovery. Whenever Corbenik lost a significant amount of hit points, it would use Cruel Exploitation to steal some back; but it never got back all it had lost, so its hit point total gradually diminished.

How many dozens of minutes we fought, I had no idea. When only a small amount of Corbenik's hit points remained, it flew high up into the sky.

"Aw, no fair!" I called, but until it came down, all we could do was use our time to recover. So we took what advantage we could.

"What's that?" Kite said, and I looked up to see specks of shining green light gathering around the hovering monster. The lights completely covered it, forming a thin membrane, and Corbenik slowly descended again.

When I targeted it, I could see the words *Supreme Defense* next to its name. *What?* I wondered, and when I made a test slash at it, it did no damage at all. Even an attack skill was unable to drop its HP a single point.

"It's impossible," Balmung muttered, sighing as he watched me slashing away.

This was the first time I'd heard Balmung complain, and I looked at him. Someone who was a celebrity in this world—a player

•hack // Another Birth

character famous enough to have two names—was starting to give up. It shocked me. I had thought he would never, ever give up, no matter what.

Kite and Balmung both lowered their weapons. I bit my lip. *I don't want it to end in a place like this.* "No! If we give up, we'll lose!" I shouted, and I brought my sword to bear alone. My voice had a tremble in it, though.

Kite looked at me, but I didn't turn toward him. I didn't want him to guess that I was bluffing.

My persistence, at least, shocked him into motion. "Give Orca baaack!" he shouted, as he took a running step toward Corbenik.

But at that moment, a voice said from behind us, "Everyone is here. We are all fighting!"

Everyone? When I turned around, there was Aura, floating in the air, both hands clasped tightly at her chest like she was praying—and many pale lights were floating around her. One speck of light came down and alighted next to Kite. Kite tilted his head—and suddenly, a Blademaster I never saw in person before appeared. He had a large, powerful physique, and green and white war paint covered his upper body. On his lower half, he wore only light equipment.

It was Orca.

I hadn't met him, but he had been in the vision of the past that Mia had shown me. He was the player character who had sacrificed himself to protect Kite.

Kite opened his eyes wide, looking at Orca. I was sure I shared his expression of surprise. Orca was supposed to be comatose. How could someone in a coma be logged into the game—into The World? It didn't seem possible.

Is this Aura's power?

"I can't just let you guys handle it all by yourselves!" Orca shouted, brandishing his sword.

Does he plan on fighting at our side?

"Sis!" a familiar voice called from behind me, and I turned around—almost dropping my sword in surprise. Standing there was Kazu, my little brother, clad in a pure white robe. "BlackRose is you, right, Sis?" he said, looking straight at me.

Fumikazu . . .

Kazu smiled. *See, I knew it—didn't I say you'd make a good Heavy Blade?* That smile seemed to say—a triumphant smile it was impossible to hate.

"You're all right," I said, taking a step toward him—but then Kazu turned into a pale light that floated up toward Aura again. "Fumikazu!" I cried. *Don't go away again!* I stared at the light my brother had become, and I swore not to lose sight of him. *I will not lose him again!*

We were in the midst of battle, but I forgot it all and looked up at the lights as they flew around Aura in a flurry. Kite and Balmung gazed up at them, as well; Orca apparently had turned back into one of them.

.hack // Another Birth

Aura nodded slightly. As if at her command, all the lights shot toward Corbenik and dashed themselves into it. To my horror, the lights burst open and disappeared, leaving behind only some marks on Corbenik's thin membrane.

Something snapped inside me. My mind went completely blank; without any conscious thought, my hands found themselves bringing up my massive sword and slashing at Corbenik.

Balmung leapt up behind me, and we directly faced each other as he flew by. I mowed away at Corbenik's lower half with all my might, as Balmung simultaneously hacked at the upper half.

And it had an effect. Cracks formed in the thin membrane that shielded the Phase.

"Damn youuu!" Kite shouted from behind us, running up with his twin blades raised. He leapt up and thrust their points deep into Corbenik's side, and then he brought them down as gravity dragged him to the ground, adding a pair of long gashes to the slashes Balmung and I had cut into the shield among the pockmarks left by the lights.

Visual noise raced across the screen; with a horrible rending noise, the shield shivered into fragments.

We did it! Holding my sword aloft, I did a little victory dance. *Now we just have to beat the monster itself!* I psyched myself up and stared at Corbenik—but again, it denied us the opportunity to fight, as it gave off a flash and rose swiftly into the dark sky.

The display's colors inverted, the earth rumbled, and a visual distortion stung the eyes—but I doubted this was the end. My field

of view suddenly was bathed in a stark white light; from within the light, something emerged. As the light lessened, I could see character strings lining up in the air around Corbenik, and the leaf above us started to divide. Countless crimson flower petals rained from the sky, blocking my view. I waved my sword around as if to ward them off.

“What?” I cried—and when the petals cleared, an array of floating eyes appeared before us. They were light purple eyes, with yellow irises—I targeted them, and the name Corbenik was displayed yet again.

We have to defeat this thing again?!

Balmung clicked his tongue. “How many times must we defeat it?”

I scowled at him. “As many times as it takes!” I slashed at Corbenik.

“BlackRose!” Kite shouted from behind me, and I stopped instantly. From the yellow irises, seedlike spheres called Seekers were emerging. “These things first!” Kite directed.

I laid into the Seekers.

After we defeated the Seekers, we attacked the main body, which sent out more Seekers. . . . This process repeated so many times that I lost count, mechanically going through the motions.

For Fumikazu.

To our great relief, the Corbenik eyes had no recovery skills, and its hit point gauge was whittled away. When only a few millimeters remained, Kite, Balmung, and I could smell victory—when an intense visual noise wracked the display.





.hack // Another Birth

Is it going to be reborn again?!

"The server!" Helba's voice cried. "It's crashing! Can't sustain it!"

"We're almost there, Helba!" I cried. The noise intensified. The image shook violently, and I found myself unable to keep my eyes open any longer. *And just when we've almost got it beat!*

Suddenly, there was the sound of something bursting, and the noise and tremors ceased. When I opened my eyes, all was calm, as if nothing had happened.

Balmung looked around and asked Helba, "It recovered?"

"Who knows?" her voice replied. "But one thing's for certain—my server is dead."

"It doesn't matter," Kite said. "Now is the time to end this!" He slashed at Corbenik, combining consecutive attack skills, and we all joined in.

As we fought, we eventually ran out of SP recovery items. Next our HP items were exhausted. Even then, we could only keep on fighting. Our skill points gradually recovered over time, so we made the most of them with judicious attack skills. And finally, the last form of Corbenik was silenced—as far as we could tell.

"We did it," Kite murmured.

But our relief lasted only a moment, as Corbenik started to shine. Lines of data progressions extended outward in a helix, flying toward the three player characters present.

"It's Drain Heart!" Kite said, his eyes wide in disbelief.

Drain Heart? I never had heard the term, and I turned it over in my mind. Then several of the data strings pierced my body—or

rather, BlackRose's body—and I screamed. As if they had pierced my actual body, I felt horrible pain. My vision dimmed, and I felt my consciousness slip.



I stood alone in the familiar wilderness strewn with crimson rose petals. My body was sluggish, and moving my legs was heavy work. Even so, I wandered aimlessly.

Before me appeared a girl wearing a tattered, black evening dress. It was the other me. She held both hands out in front of her, as if she wanted something.

Silently, I handed her the massive, shining gold sword I realized I had been dragging behind me. "Thank you," I said. And she smiled.

A sudden gust of wind blew the petals scattered at my feet up into the air, in such numbers that they blocked my view. But before she vanished, I was sure I heard the other me say, "You have done well."



My head was pounding. I was horribly dizzy, and my eyes refused to open. I lifted my right hand to press it to my temple, and my fingers met the warmth of the FMD.

Hub? There was a gap in my memory, a blank space—as I realized I didn't know what I had been doing for the past while, my mind filled with a restless anxiety. *What was I doing, again?*

.hack // Another Birth

My eyes finally opened, and there was scenery visible in the FMD. I narrowed my eyes at the red Shinto shrine archway, the rusted ruins, and the people collapsed on the ground around me. Slowly, I grasped the situation I was in, and my memories returned. We were fighting Corbenik . . . Aura appeared . . . I got data drained . . . and I faintly heard Aura's voice say, "Mother." I was sure that was what she had said.

Coming completely to my senses, I looked around. Everyone involved in the operation was here in Net Slum.

"The data is normal," Helba said. "We've done it." She helped up anyone who was still on the ground.

Normal . . . which means . . . I looked at Kite. He slowly nodded, and then he looked at everyone in turn.

"I heard Aura's voice," he said. "But she . . ."

I cocked my head. What the heck *had* happened to her?

"She was born," Wiseman said, "but not until she died and took Morganna with her. In order to be born, perhaps she had to die first."

They died?

"Apoptosis," Wiseman continued. "One manner of finding life in death."

Because everyone wished it on her behalf, Aura was reborn?

I slowly put my thoughts into words. "What changes the world is the desire of everyone's hearts." If not for all of us working together, surely things wouldn't have turned out this way.

"Does this mean . . . it's ended?" Lios asked with a sigh.

If she was reborn, it hasn't ended. . . .

"No," Kite said, and smiled. "It's begun."

In Net Slum, the day dawned. The gloomy clouds were pushed away by the brightening sky. We all acknowledged one another respectfully, and the operation came to an end.

Reluctant to leave, I drew close to Kite's side, and a strange silence ensued. Everything I had been through up to this point twisted in my head like a kaleidoscope.

I have to say it, I thought, staring at Kite's profile against the lightening sky.

"Thank you," Kite murmured softly. "If you hadn't been there, BlackRose, I might not have gotten this far."

He said everything to me that I wanted to say to him, and I was taken aback. "Wh-what are you talking about, being all formal like that? *I'm* the one who—"

And suddenly, I was called back to the real world. "Sis, the phone's ringing," Kouta's sleepy voice said from beside me. I slipped the FMD goggles up and saw him standing there, holding my cell phone. Its display said that Dad was calling.

"Sorry, phone," I said to Kite, stripping off the FMD in a flash and eagerly snatching the phone from Kouta. "Hello?"

"Oh, you're still awake," Dad's voice said.

"Yeah . . ." *What about Fumikazu? I saw him in the game, but . . .* Swallowing the words I wanted to say but could not, I waited for Dad to continue.

"Can you come here right away?" he said. "I'll call a taxi for you."

"You mean . . ." My voice was trembling.

.hack // Another Birth

Kouta hugged Hana to his chest and peered at my face. "Sis?" He grabbed my knee with his free hand.

"What, Kouta's awake, too?" Dad said.

"Yeah."

"Fumikazu's regained consciousness," Dad said.

Tears filled my eyes.

When I had seen Fumikazu turn into a ball of light and smash himself against Corbenik, I had thought it was too late to save him. Even when the data had returned to normal, I'd had no confidence that he would recover.

But he had.

"Could you bring Kouta with you?" Dad was saying. "He probably wants to see Fumikazu."

"Sure," I croaked, the tears flowing freely now. Stifling the tremble in my voice, I asked Dad, "How's he doing?"

"The first thing he said," my dad answered, "was 'Where's Akira?'"

Amid my shock, the tears fell endlessly. "I'll be right there," I promised, and I hung up. Leaving Hana there in the room, I took Kouta with me to the hospital.



A few days later, still during winter break, Lios, as a system administrator of The World, reserved a café for us. I hurried to the neighborhood train station with my tennis racket in hand and sports bag slung over my shoulder.

Mistral—Mrs. Kurokawa—who I had arranged to meet at the station, noticed me and walked over. “Wow . . . you really did come straight from practice.”

“Not like I could skip it.”

“Now that’s dedication!” she chirped.

“Actually, I’m late, aren’t I?”

“I don’t suppose it matters,” Mistral said. “This whole thing was so sudden.”

“Anyway, did you hear about Elk?” I asked. *Had Mistral heard from Kite what had happened after I got Drain Hearted?*

“He shielded Kite, I hear.”

I nodded. After I was Drain Hearted, Kite was targeted next. He thought he couldn’t dodge—but just then, Elk appeared and pushed him aside to take the bullet.”

“If we give up, we’ll lose!” I couldn’t get what you said out of my head, BlackRose,” Kite shyly had told me afterward.

And so Kite, the only one left standing, attacked Corbenik, even though he must have thought it was useless. But what met his blade was not Corbenik, but Aura.

I don’t know if she was protecting Corbenik or what, but Wiseman’s words, “In order to be born, perhaps she had to die first,” echoed in my head. If that was true, she met Kite’s blade not to protect Corbenik . . . but to die.

“Elk is brave,” I said. “If it had been me, I probably couldn’t have done it.”

.hack // Another Birth

"I don't know," Mrs. Kurokawa said, poking me. "You might have done the same thing, Akira!"

As we walked on, I mused, "Wonder if it's very much farther . . ."

"The café? Isn't it close?"

I wasn't sure who had come up with the suggestion for all of us to meet in the first place. The first person I'd heard voice support of an offline meeting had been, to my surprise, Wiseman.

"Where should we arrange to meet?" Balmung had said. "There's people's jobs and mismatched real-world situations to consider . . . I hope we can find an arrangement convenient for everyone."

"Why don't we leave it all to Lios at CC Corp.?" Wiseman had suggested.

"Me?!" Lios had said, bewildered.

"Sounds interesting," Helba'd said, giggling at him. "I might join you."

Who knows if she'll actually show up, though, I thought.

As we walked, Mrs. Kurokawa asked me, "So, how've you been lately?"

"Lately?"

"You've been e-mailing me, but it sounds more real in person."

"Well, Fumikazu's better," I said. "It's like the idea he was ever in a coma is a big fat lie."

She smiled.

"I told him the game was off-limits . . . for a while," I continued.

"Oh? Why?"

"Well, he missed a whole lot of school while he was asleep, so we're spending the rest of winter break studying—me, too, because my grades dropped so much."

She laughed. "Poor Fumikazu, forced to spend all his time studying with his sister."

"Oh, that reminds me," I said.

"Hmm?"

"What happened to your husband? You said in your e-mail that he got injured."

"Ah, right," she said. "Listen to this." I nodded for her to continue. "That day—I told you he was on the night shift, right? He laughed and said that, seeing as it was Christmas Eve, it'd be a breeze, but then he came home all busted up!"

"Why?"

"Apparently he got beaten up by two young girls and some man."

"For real?!"

"He had no idea what they were doing."

I considered. "That sounds like a strange group to be going around mugging people."

"I'll say. What's more, the guy, even though it was winter, was wearing a Hawaiian shirt."

A Hawaiian shirt? When Dad had gotten caught up in the network trouble at Minato Mirai, he'd told us that he'd seen a young

•hack // Another Birth

girl and a man in a Hawaiian shirt there, too. *Must be a coincidence*, I thought.

Mrs. Kurokawa peered at my silent face. As if shaking off the train of thought, I said, "What were they doing at Tokyo Mega Float? There's nothing there."

"Well, the backup data center is there, so I guess maybe they were after information. . . ." We came to a halt in front of a neatly decorated building, and she said, "Here we are."

"Yeah."

I hadn't had any interest in an offline meeting. In *The World*, they had all been my companions, but I hardly even imagined what they might be like in real life. Even so, Kite had said he would go, so it was probably inevitable that I went, too. I wanted to meet him. I already had thanked him in the game for everything he had done, but I wanted to tell him in person.

I was glad Kite had been the bracelet bearer.

I was glad I had spoken to him in the first place.

I was glad I'd stuck with him to the end.

Bringing my fast-beating heart under control, I quickly fixed up my hair with a pocket comb. Mrs. Kurokawa smiled as she watched me.

"Don't worry," she said. "You're you, after all."

I wonder who I'll see first.

"They're all waiting, so let's go on in," she suggested, and I opened the café door.



Another Epilogue●

Several months later, Asaoka and the other upperclassmen graduated, and I became a high school junior. The class lineups didn't change, so I continued as always with Shouko, Miho, and Risa, getting on as famously as ever. There was one small difference, though: Miho had a boyfriend—Ishii, the one she had talked about during the cultural festival. She apparently had done a fine job of communicating her feelings. I was a little envious.

I had accomplished something more important than that, though—the coach had selected me to be captain of the tennis club. This caused some small hubbub among the upperclassmen, and they even thought of refusing me. But the one who kept that from happening was Risa. “That kind of thing will never happen in this club again,” she had said, and the other members had nodded in assent at her words.

“You should be all right, Sis,” Fumikazu had told me, and I knew I would.

.hack // Another Birth

So my club duties and my studies had taken up all my time recently, and I no longer logged on to The World. Even so, it would have been a lie to say that Kite and the others were not on my mind. For that reason, I at least checked my e-mail every day.

Today, an e-mail from Kite was there in my inbox.

I got an e-mail from Aura, with an area name in it. Would you like to go there with me?

I had been waiting for just such an invitation, so I immediately donned my FMD and headed for The World. When I warped into Lia Fail, Kite ran up.

"It's been a while," he said, smiling.

His smile was infectious. "I'll say. What's up?"

"You haven't seen the BBS?"

"Oh—no," I admitted. Checking the BBS had been so much a part of my routine, but I had forgotten it in my honest happiness at Kite's invitation. For the life of me, I couldn't tell him that was why I had hurried in.

"How should I put this . . ." Kite hesitated, and I regretted not having looked at the BBS.

"Uh, should I go look and then come back?"

"No, it's just—" Kite drew in a breath. "Someone saw Mia."

"Mia?!" I wildly raised my voice, and Kite nodded. *But Mia's supposed to be gone, since Kite Data Drained her as Macha!* "Could that mean a Phase has come back to life?"

"No, not that," Kite said definitively.

"But why now, of all times?"

"The BBS said 'cat-type PC,' but I think it's Mia."

I looked intently at Kite's face.

"*And* I got an e-mail from Aura," he said.

"Yeah? What'd it say?"

"That another life is now about to be born again."

"That *could* mean Mia," I said, and someone warped in behind me. I turned around, following Kite's gaze; there, to my surprise, was Elk.

"The e-mail from Aura . . . It was sent to me, too," he said.

Really?

"It was Ω: Hidden, Darkside, Holy Ground—I can go, too, right?" Elk looked back and forth between us.

Kite and I made eye contact; then we both nodded. "Sure! Let's go." Kite invited Elk and me into a party, and then we started up the Chaos Gate.



After transferring in, we looked around—still in the habit that had developed since Morganna had started the whole mess. Gloomy clouds hung in the sky, and large drops of rain poured down on the three of us. The wilderness that spread out at our feet extended to the horizon.

It was not infected with a virus; but, somehow, the area had a shadow over it.

hack // Another Birth

“Hurry!” Elk cried excitedly as he took off running in the direction of the dungeon. We started running after him. By the time we got to the dungeon entrance and went in, Elk was in a joyful mood.

It was one of those dungeons like the inside of a living being—the walls moved like they were breathing; here and there, bones protruded from them.

When Elk took his first step inside, a figure appeared in the air above us, facing away. He unsteadily approached it and slowly began, “Are you . . . ?”

The small figure turned to face us. It had red eyes, and ears stuck out from under a pointed hat. Animal whiskers grew around its mouth. It bowed toward us, and then it disappeared as if absorbed into the dungeon wall. *A cat?*

“No, wait! Don’t go!” Elk shouted—but it already was gone. Elk turned to Kite and me. “It’s Mia! Did you see that? That was Mia!” He sounded desperate for agreement.

Mia had deep blue fur and looked like a well-designed NPC. The cat we’d seen just now looked nothing like her. I glanced toward Kite.

“Let’s keep going!” he urged us, and we hefted our weapons and continued forward.

The first magical portal we came across in the dungeon opened, and we automatically stepped back. What emerged from the portal was something we’d thought we’d never see again—a monster clad in green hexes!

How? Faster than thought, I shouted to Kite and Elk, "We've got to run!"

But Kite shook his head. "It's all right."

"What the hell? Any way you look at it, that's a Data Bug!" I cried defiantly, but Kite just lifted his right arm.

"You can't see it?" he said calmly.

"No, I can see it," I admitted. I hadn't noticed it before; but there before my eyes, the familiar object on his arm began to glow with a faint light—the bracelet he'd gotten from Aura, the bracelet I had broken. "But this means—"

"I'll explain later," Kite said. "For now, we've got *this* thing to deal with!" He slashed at the Data Bug.

I don't get it. Why? How? My mind was all jumbled; but, unable to leave the fight to just Kite and Elk, I joined in.

The text "Protect Break OK" showed up, and Kite aimed at the monster and fired off a data drain.

As soon as the monster was defeated, I turned to Kite for an explanation. *Wasn't that thing broken?*

"You see—" Kite began, but just then Elk started to run deeper into the dungeon. "Elk! Wait a minute!" Kite cried, taking off in pursuit.

I ran along beside him in confusion.

>What's going on?

As we ran, we conversed via Flash Mail.

.hack // Another Birth

>>The other day, I got a summons from Aura. Orca and I went to the area where he first took me to train, and Aura was there waiting for us.

So, *she really did get born completely*. Once I'd heard evidence of that, I felt relieved for some reason.

>Then what?

>>She gave me the item Book of Twilight~Daybreak.

>?

>>The item turned into this bracelet.

In spite of myself, I froze in place. "Now just a minute!" I cried. "Weren't the bracelet and Cubia two sides of the same coin? Does this mean *it* came back to life, too?"

Kite stopped, as well.

Say *something*. Even with the eight Phases gone, if Cubia—whose growth was linked to the bracelet—were here, then it felt like everything we had worked so hard for would come crashing down.

As I stood there in my tracks, Kite shook his head. "I don't think so."

"You don't *think* so?" I said. "Isn't that a bit irresponsible?"

"The bracelet . . . the first one got made when Aura was incomplete. I think that's why Cubia was born. So this time it should be okay," Kite said and smiled. "I won't use it the wrong way, either. That's not what Aura wants."

"I can understand that, but—"

"I'm sure—" he started so say; then he stared in the direction Elk had gone. "Data Bug!" he cried.

Elk came into view, fighting alone. I hefted my massive sword and slashed at the Data Bug. "You're sure—what?" We'd fought Data Bugs so many times that it was easy to continue our conversation while we fought.

"I think Aura knew that Mia was going to be reborn," Kite said, slashing away. "She entrusted the bracelet to me for that time."

"You mean now?"

"Yeah. I think that otherwise, she wouldn't have handed it over. She wanted to prove that it's something that can have a purpose other than only a grand struggle."

Well, that could be. "Okay," I said. "I'll stick with you until we see Mia!"

"Thanks."

We crushed the Data Bug. When Elk looked like he was about to take off again, I told him, "Elk, you don't have to be in such a hurry. Mia's not going to run off."

"But—" he protested.

"Just like you waited, I'm sure Mia's waiting for you," I said. "So, it's okay not to be in such a rush."

.hack // Another Birth

Somehow, I managed to convince him. "Y-yeah, you're right," he said.

Elk, Kite, and I continued onward, taking out Data Bug after Data Bug that emerged from the magical portals. When we reached floor B5, the cat that had appeared at the dungeon entrance once again came into view.

It did not resemble Mia at all. I had no idea if it was an ally or enemy, even.

Elk rushed over to it. "Mia?" he asked. "Tell me, are you Mia?!"

We saw the floating cat move its mouth slightly. "What?" I asked, but the cat ignored me and disappeared again. "Hey, what'd it say?" I turned to Kite, who was standing behind me.

He stared at where the cat had been. "It said . . . 'Macha.'"

What! Maybe this isn't Mia's rebirth at all, but Macha's?! "Hey, what if a Phase really does come back?"

"In that case . . ." Kite hesitated, and then he rubbed his right arm.

"Come on, let's hurry! Go!" Elk urged, and we advanced onward, anxiety enveloping us.

Every single portal released a Data Bug that Kite had to Data Drain before we could defeat it. Before long, it was clear that his movements were getting slower, apparently from Data Drain overuse. Even though I was worried about Kite's condition, I couldn't get Elk to stop and wait as he led us forward in a dungeon that just kept going deeper and deeper.

Finally, on floor B15, which must have been the bottom floor, something like a bluish-purple iron dumbbell appeared, floating in midair. It seemed to be made of some watery substance; we could see through it to the scenery beyond. There was some kind of ring buried in its center, and it didn't attack but just floated there.

"What's that?" I slowly approached, keeping a close eye on it. I'd never seen or even heard of a creature like this—the only thing I could be sure of was that it wasn't a player character. When I tried targeting it, the name that was revealed was Dawn Wanderer.

Dawn . . . Is this something that shows up in the Epitaph of Twilight?

"Here it comes!" Kite shouted, and it suddenly launched an attack against us.

Leaving Elk standing behind us, Kite and I spared no skill points as we unleashed a series of attack skills. The Dawn Wanderer's attacks weren't very strong; before long, we defeated it.

"Wasn't that too easy?" I said, suspicion nagging at me.

"What the heck *was* that, anyway?" Kite asked. Busy with our conversation, we forgot to keep watching.

"Look!" Elk shouted, and I stared back at where the monster had been dealt its final blow.

"It's been resurrected!" I cried. It had changed to a yellowish-brown color, and the spheres on either side of the dumbbell shape now had shells around them like armor. As if for added protection, faint silver thorns were attached to the shells.

•hack // Another Birth

Our fight against the eighth Phase, Corbenik, flashed through my head—it had revived twice, changing shape each time.

“We’ve got no choice,” Kite said.

I nodded. In that moment, the cat that had murmured “Macha” appeared over the newly transformed monster’s head. The cat slowly descended, and then it *fused with* the monster: Where the ring had been before, there was now a squatting cat figure.

“Does this mean . . . ?” I asked. It was an awfully familiar scenario—it reminded me of the Kite form that was inside Cubia Core. Just as Cubia and Kite’s bracelet were two sides of the same coin, the cat that had murmured “Macha” and this dumbbell-shaped monster also must be related.

But the thought crossed my mind that Elk was convinced the cat was Mia. The idea of fighting this monster right in front of him made me hesitate somewhat. “Do we fight?” I asked.

Kite considered for a moment; then he muttered, “Yeah.”

The name of the monster floating before us had changed to Temptress Lover. I stared at its fortified armor and thought, *It’s all right*. It was not clad in green hexes.

“Mia!” Elk shouted, running up to the monster.

“Look out!” I cried, automatically moving forward and shielding him from the monster’s blow. Compared to the Dawn Wanderer, this new version’s attack power was considerably higher. I withstood the blow and slashed away.

Elk had lost the will to fight. I doubted we could depend on any support from the rear. He must have been disturbed by the idea

that Mia—what he thought was Mia—would be destroyed before his eyes again.

I had recovery items, and Kite and I were confident we could win on our own. But was it right to defeat Macha, which seemed to be Mia, in front of Elk again?

Like Kite, all I did was regular attacks. Even though I knew there was no point in dragging out the fight, it would have seemed just too cruel to use attack skills. Despite that, the monster's hit points steadily decreased.

Then, from behind us, a voice suddenly chanted an attack spell. "PhaRai Don!" A flash of lightning struck the monster's head from above, and its HP gauge reached zero.

"What?!" I cried, and I turned around to see Elk with his staff brandished over his head, standing there in blank amazement, apparently as surprised as I was that he had been the one to finish off the monster. "Elk?" He stood rooted to the spot, and I ran over to him. "Are you okay?" I didn't know what else to say.

But as I approached, his eyes were focused not on me but on something behind me. There was a question lurking in them.

When I turned around, there was a familiar NPC descending slowly through the air. "Wh-what?" *How?*

"Mia!" Elk cried happily, running over.

Mia alighted and slowly looked around, holding her head, as if making sure of where she was.

"Oh, Mia!" Elk said, hopping up and down. "I'm so happy that you came back!"

hack // Another Birth

Mia seemed to move in a daze, but then her pupils grew wide. "Hi, Elk!" she said. The two of them smiled.

Not wanting to get in the way, I tugged on Kite's arm. Mia had appeared before us. It was enough.

Kite turned around, and I motioned for us to go—but then Mia spoke to Kite. "*That's a unique bracelet.*"

Hub?! At Mia's words, I stared at Kite's bracelet. I didn't look any different from the way it had before. *What's she talking about?*

"Can I take a look?" Mia said, slowly reaching toward Kite's right arm. She touched the bracelet.

Elk was taken aback. "Mia . . . Your memories, they're—"

You mean maybe she—? Maybe Mia had memories only of the time before the Wave had started attacking. Maybe that's why even though she remembered Elk, she didn't remember Kite or me . . . and maybe she had forgotten figuring out that she was Macha, as well.

Kite had a sad smile on his face. "Can you see it?" he asked her. I didn't understand that sad smile at the time, but he later explained to me that they were repeating the conversation he'd had the first time he had met Mia.

"Yes, of course!" Mia said. "Do you mean to say you can't see this nice bracelet? Well, even if you can't see it, as long as you know it's there, it's the same thing as seeing it, right?"

"Yes, it is," Kite murmured.

"Mia's memories—" Elk began.

Kite interrupted him. "It's all right, because—because you will be with her."

Elk cocked his head at Kite's words. "Me? Oh . . . Okay! I'm always going to be with you, Mia. And I'm going to help you remember things."

Mia looked at Elk. Perhaps she had no idea that she had lost her memory.

"Hey," Elk said. "Call me again when you're gonna play in The World. Don't forget us! Mia and I . . . we'll be waiting."

"Mm-hmm," Kite said, and I nodded.

"So long," I said.

Elk slowly reached out to Mia. She smiled and took hold of his hand. "I'll see you around," she said, prompting Elk. They warped out, vanishing.

For a long time, Kite and I gazed at the spot where they had been.



Postscript •

The author, Miu Kawasaki, here. First, I'd like to say that I'm bad at things like postscripts. There's no particular reason; I'm bad because I'm bad. I doubt this will end up being related to the book, but it would make me happy if you read through it.

It makes the most sense to start with a greeting. To those who have been reading since the first volume—what a long time it's been! And to those who began with volume four, nice to meet you.

Two and a half years have passed since this story began. I have loved it like my own child, but it will soon be out of my hands. When I think about no longer having to worry about deadlines . . . honestly, I feel lonely.

It has been so long, but time has just flown by.

This is sudden, but—tangent time! The prairie dog, Hana, that appeared in the story actually existed—until this spring. Before I got into this business—to be exact, since I was seventeen—she had been one of the little girls that helped keep me going.

.hack // Another Birth

At my place, in addition to Hana there were Maru, Haru, and Aki, three other prairie dogs—but last summer Maru went missing, and this winter Haru met with an unforeseen accident, leaving this world before my eyes. Even Hana, my constant companion, in the spring of this year (2005) settled down to sleep next to Aki . . . and went on a final journey.

Then, for the sake of my sanity, what came to take their places was a miniature schnauzer named Kinoto. Though, actually, whether it's a miniature or a standard . . . the source was unclear, so I don't know.

To be honest, when all the prairie dogs were no more, I couldn't get anything done. It felt like an important part of me had gone missing. I abandoned sleeping, eating, and even working. What got me through in spite of all that was, I think, Kinoto's help.

When I would sit at my desk all night, he would bring me my favorite little blanket. When I'd sit there spacing out, unable to think up material, he would bring toys. When I would toss and turn, unable to sleep, he would snuggle up close.

Once when he was little, I had an asthma attack and had to call an ambulance. Ever since then, whenever I cough, he brings me my asthma medicine inhaler. He's so clever. Maybe saying that makes me a doting parent. (Rueful laugh.)

At times I have felt sick at heart and avoided reality; but propped up by Kinoto and encouraged by my mentor, I was somehow able to finish the project.

I'd like to take this space to proclaim this loudly. All four of you, thanks for sticking with me for so long! Please get along well and have fun digging holes together! We'll eventually meet again!

And to Kinoto, who I will likely be indebted to again in the future—keep on propping me up.

The bullying that happened in volumes one and two also was based on something I experience personally.

One more thing. The dream that Akira Hayami/BlackRose had in the story was a dream I had when I got into this business—every night, it seemed. It was a mysterious dream, so I drew on it as a source.

I wonder what dream divination would make of it?

Thanks to working on these books, I met a lot of people.

T-Mura, T-Naka, my editors at Kadokawa Shoten . . . I caused you so much trouble during the serialization. I feel very apologetic for always making you worry about my health and calling me up. And for the delay in the final deadline . . . I really am sorry about that. But I think it would be great if we got to work together again.

M-Yama at CyberConnect2 Corp., Tomuneko the illustrator, and Waka . . . I asked you for a lot of difficult characters. You still drew them for me, and I really do thank you from the bottom of my heart.

I-Fuji the supervisor . . . I called you at all hours of the night crying and caused a lot of problems. I hope we can continue our phone conversations.

H-Se, who manages a local family restaurant . . . I owe you so much for being there all night and running up the electricity bill.

•hack // Another Birth

I might ask to do it again, but please watch over me with casual interest.

Last, to all of you who picked up this book who I do not know personally . . . For supporting me until now, I truly thank you. I did look over your postcards. I sneaked some peeks at a certain BBS, as well. I'm sorry for worrying you with my hospital trips and whatnot. I'm all right now, I think.

.hack is expanding to all forms of media. We might meet each other again somewhere. No, I'm pretty sure you will catch my name somewhere else. (I think there are some who have already caught it. . . .)

When that happens, I earnestly hope that you again love the story that is *.hack*.

Thank you for everything. And here's hoping for all the things to come.

Miu Kawasaki

Afterword



It has been about three years. When I heard that Mr. Ito was taking on an apprentice, the woman I was introduced to was pretty and surprisingly young. She cheerfully replied, "I still do not know my right from my left, but I will give this my wholehearted devotion!" She also said, "Nice to meet you, too."

That was how I met her—Miu Kawasaki.

From then on, we would have regular meetings every other week in the Bandai conference room and discuss various things as I refined plans for the next (current) work, *.back//G.U.* In the midst of that, talk about the next story serializations in *Monthly Comptiq* also came up.

A novelization of the previous *.back* game series that would be an interesting read even for players who had already experienced the games, told from the point of view of the heroine, BlackRose—this was how the serialization of *.back//Another Birth* started.

•hack // Another Birth

It has been twenty-four months since then. This work really did become something that could be called an interesting read, with a lot of side stories even during serialization. It became steadily more interesting with each installment, and I myself was surprised by the evolution of talent that Miu Kawasaki displayed.

When I frankly told Mr. Ito my observation, he replied, "Honestly, I'm surprised, too. It feels like she's more than qualified." He had a rather happy expression as he said that.

As serialization progressed, I took the liberty of employing two individuals from CyberConnect2: Waka and Tomuneko. The two of them were originally game creators and developers, with illustration as well as development duties. This was their first experience with monthly illustration work, and they worked hard on it.

To make matters worse, I myself did a strict internal check of their monthly illustrations and coached them, all while thinking about how not to let the story Miu Kawasaki wrote fall behind.

Be that as it may, they both were truly happy as they drew. It proved to be an extraordinarily good experience.

Novels and illustrations.

Even with our residences being far flung, our hearts were still one. Thus the monthly serializations came out on time.

The result, I think, is a gem of a good story coming to a finish. Here the curtain closes on our long, long project, with these four short novels.

And so . . .

From here, another new “birth” will happen in the *.hack//G.U.* project, with all the people who have been involved up until this point and with new relationships born from here on. Packed with a lot of feelings that will explode all at once. It will itself involve various forms of media, with the mysterious charm of the link known as *.hack*.

Of course Miu Kawasaki will be with us, as well. She is about to stand, once again, on a new stage.

To all you readers—now that serialization has concluded and the last volume here is released . . . Doesn't it feel lonely?

She won't give us enough time to feel that way. In the blink of an eye, a new superbness will come. Please look forward to it! I know I do. Even as I make it. And thus I pass the days, each day searching for a new excitement.

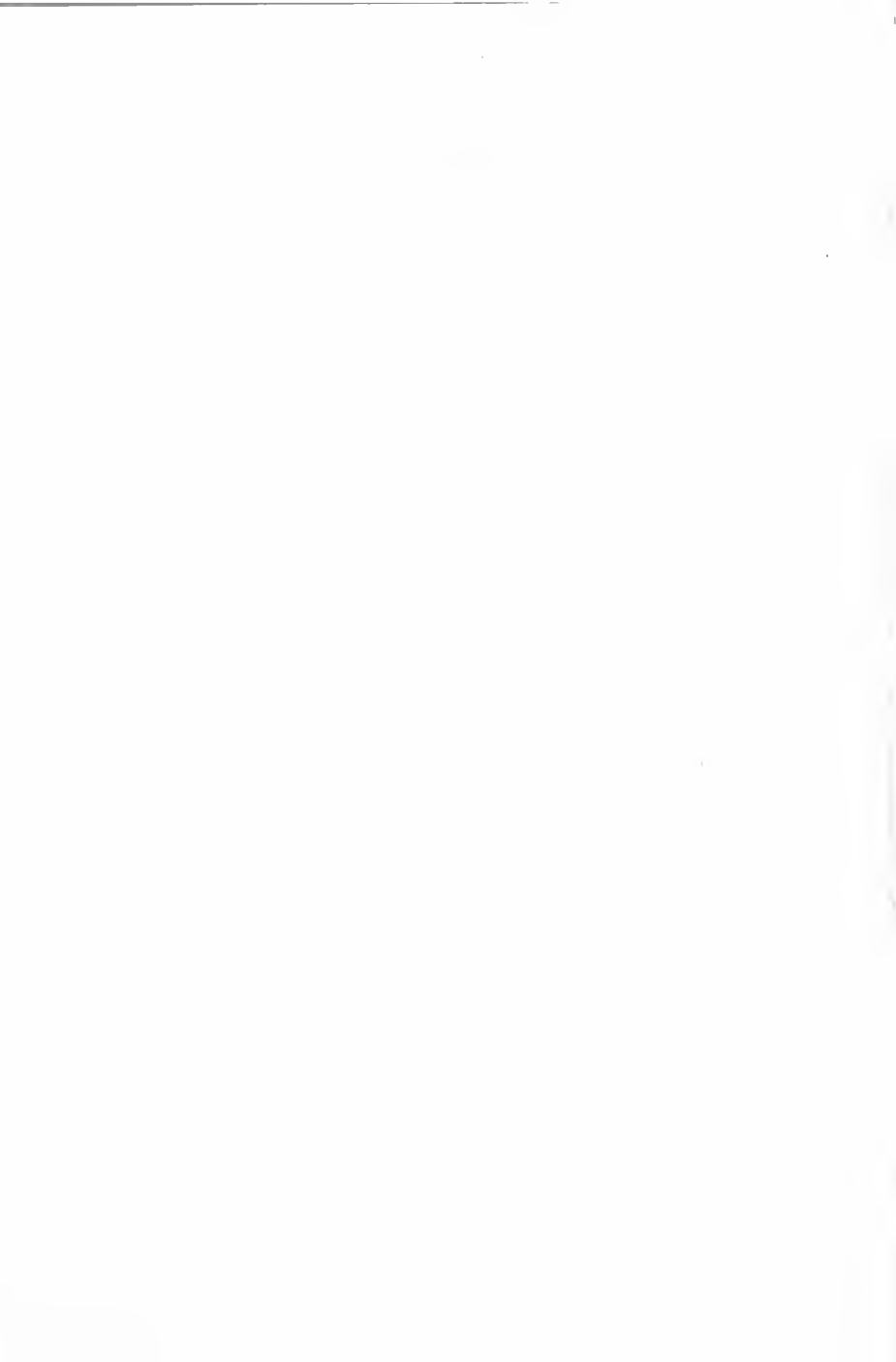
Miu Kawasaki, you really worked hard on that long serial. Now, let's go ahead to the next!

CyberConnect2 Inc. Representative Director, President
Hiroshi Matsuyama

11/05



Art File •



It's been a long time, everyone. This is Waka at CyberConnect2, in charge of black and white illustrations. With this fourth volume, the *.back//Another Birth* series is finally at an end. How was it, do you think?

From volumes one to four, I have drawn illustrations for a truly long time. When the *.back* game series was made, I was a graphic designer; but at the time this serial began, they had switched me to being a planner, and I was doing planning on the *Narutimate Hero* series. Looking in from the outside, I imagine that the idea of writing game specs while drawing the illustrations for a novel would have a weird feel to it. Isn't CyberConnect2 an interesting company? (Laugh.)

By the time volume four went on sale, I had made three game titles, so deadlines tended to pile up near each other, making for exciting times. However, that, too, has now come to an end.

During this long time of drawing illustrations, I have continued to watch Akira worry over things in real life as she fights in The World. I really have come to love her character.

.hack // Another Birth

Akira's story has come to its grand finale, and how there are happy as well as lonely feelings in my heart. It also makes me feel lonely to think that this is the end of this segment of the series, but I will get to be around next time, too, so I hope to see you there!

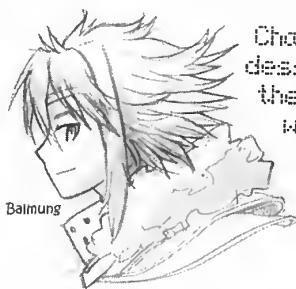
Now then, in regard to design this time, it's late in coming, but I will introduce the design of the game characters. I tried to primarily choose characters like Kite, the main character in the games.



There are more rough sketches that led to final illustrations than there are actual designs. At this point in time, the majority of these pictures are ones that not much thought went into—I just drew what I liked. But, surprisingly, these often are the ones that turned out the most interesting.

Now, for character drawings, first up is the game's main character, Kite. As he is an extension of the person who's playing the game, he does not have much in the way of personality idiosyncrasies; but scenes where he was left speechless, like the BlackRose/Ryoko Terajima incident, were very interesting.

As for Balmung, he's a cool, pretty-boy character, but I get this image of him being spontaneous and cute. This must be the influence of *.hack//Legend of the Twilight*, I'm thinking. (Laughs.)



Balmung

Character
designs in
the game
world



Balmung of
the Azure Sky.
I love that
spontaneous
personality
of his.



Mr.
Delightful

● spontaneously spacing out

hack // Another Birth

Then there is Mistral, with her external childishness and her internal, adult open-mindedness. I think her charm went way up as a result of finding out about her real-life persona. She was an important character supporting BlackRose both in the game and in real life. It was a lot of fun drawing her ever cheerful, with a smile.

I digress; but when you draw, doesn't it put a smile on your face when you draw smiles—and make you look sad when you draw sad faces? It's probably because I am empathizing, but it must look odd to see it. It feels good to be that way as I draw, though. (Laughs.)

She is a pell-mell
but surprisingly easy-
to-draw character.



● Mistral

Next, we have the memorable character Mia. Volume four sees the introduction of Mia transformed into one of the eight Phases, Macha. Traces of Mia are left over in how her hands and hair and such are violet.

I also loved Macha, the sexy Phase among the other inorganic ones—in the game, as well—but when I look at Macha and then Mia, Mia is surprisingly sexy, too, don't you think? Though she is a cat. (Laughs.)



A sexy
Character,
for a Phase.

● Macha



Mia slowly
started to
break down,
but she
still looks
good,
too.

Mia ●

.hack // Another Birth

Then there is Aura. When she first appears in the game, she has no hands and looks pallid. As you gather up the segments, her color comes back and hands attach themselves to her.

Aura. At first she had
no hands.



● Aura

Finally, we have Kazu and Orca. I drew Kazu only once, in the special edition *.hack//The World 3* (also recorded in *.hack//Another Birth* volume 2), so I tried to draw him this time in the last battle scene where all the characters show up; but, unfortunately, it never got past planning.

I want to have a look at the adventures of BlackRose and Kazu and the others after this story ends, though . . . or so say the wild ideas in my head.

What are the Akiras and Kites inside all of you doing right this very moment?

Kazu. I thought about drawing him during the last scene but gave up. So here is his only picture.



Kazu

I was thinking of drawing Orca for the last battle scene, too. . . .



Orca



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